

# INTERPRETER

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A JOURNAL OF MORMON SCRIPTURE

Volume 17 · 2016 · Pages 99-150

## **Image is Everything: Pay No Attention to the Man Behind the Curtain**

Kevin Christensen

Offprint Series

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ISSN 2372-1227 (print)

ISSN 2372-126X (online)

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# IMAGE IS EVERYTHING: PAY NO ATTENTION TO THE MAN BEHIND THE CURTAIN

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Kevin Christensen

*Abstract: Soon after the appearance of my Interpreter review of Jeremy Runnells' Letter to a CES Director, he promised to provide his personal response. Although this response has not yet appeared, he did post an essay called "The Sky is Falling" by his friend Johnny Stephenson. After I read the essay closely in May, I realized that it provides, however unintentionally, a valuable set of discussion points with illustrative examples. My response begins with some preliminaries, surveys essential background issues concerning facts, ideology, and cognitive dissonance, and then addresses his historical arguments regarding the first vision and priesthood restoration accounts.*

Soon after the appearance of my *Interpreter* review<sup>1</sup> of his *Letter to a CES Director*,<sup>2</sup> Jeremy Runnells promised to provide his personal response.<sup>3</sup> At this writing (May 2015), that personal effort has not yet appeared.<sup>4</sup> However, in April 2015, Runnells posted an essay called "The

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1 Kevin Christensen, "Eye of the Beholder, Law of the Harvest: Observations on the Inevitable Consequences of the Different Investigative Approaches of Jeremy Runnells and Jeff Lindsay," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 10 (2014): 175–238.

2 Jeremy Runnells, "Letter to a CES Director" <http://cesletter.com/Letter-to-a-CES-Director.pdf>.

3 Jeremy Runnells, posted on June 13, 2014 at <http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/eye-of-the-beholder-law-of-the-harvest-observations-on-the-inevitable-consequences-of-the-different-investigative-approaches-of-jeremy-runnells-and-jeff-lindsay/>

4 In the meantime, he has asked for financial donations to support a future effort in this regard (see Jeremy Runnells, <http://cesletter.com/ces-letter-at-the-crossroads.html>). For the record, I wrote my piece on at my own initiative, on my own time, solely using resources of my own.

Sky is Falling”<sup>5</sup> by his friend Johnny Stephenson. After reading the essay, I realized that it provides, however unintentionally, a valuable set of discussion points with illustrative examples. My response begins with some preliminaries, surveys essential background issues concerning facts, ideology, and cognitive dissonance, and then addresses his historical arguments regarding the First Vision and priesthood restoration accounts.

### Portraits and Poses

Runnells introduces his friend’s essay by saying: “We will list and debunk the numerous specific strawmans [*sic*] Kevin Christensen employs in his essay. Christensen crafts whole scenarios of what *he thinks* my position is, when it in fact is *not* my position at all. It is extremely disingenuous and arrogant on the part of Kevin Christensen to use such dishonest tactics in his attempt to discredit me and the *CES Letter*.” Runnells also comments: “So, this Mormon apologist stranger is qualified to accurately judge me, read my mind and tell us all what I was and was not disillusioned with?”

What was the point of publishing the “Letter to a CES Director” on the Web if not to permit strangers to read and judge your thoughts? And was not the point of the letter to explain to all and sundry exactly what Runnells was disillusioned with? If I had uncritically swallowed everything Runnells wrote, applauded, agreed with him, forgot everything I knew that his arguments did not address, publicly abandoned my faith, and donated to him what I saved in tithes, would he still be telling me that I was not qualified to judge his thinking because after all, we’ve never met? Are the qualifications of his uncritical readers any concern with respect to their capacity to judge the quality of his thinking? Is it my personal qualifications or my public conclusions that bother him?

Runnells says, “There are many schizophrenic instances where Christensen makes up ‘my’ argument himself and then answers it himself as if he was accurately representing my argument all along.”

I quote Runnells around twenty times in my essay, my intent being to let his own words demonstrate his positions on the points I chose to address. The only mind-reading I attempted involved my reading

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5 Jeremy Runnells and Johnny Stephenson, “The Sky is Falling” at <http://cesletter.com/apologetics/the-sky-is-falling-part-1.html>. All quotes from Runnells (unless stated otherwise) and Stephenson are to the web article, which has no pagination.

and re-reading the thoughts that Runnells published for all to read. Runnells and Stephenson are free to say whatever they choose about LDS apologists. But freedom *of* speech is not the same thing as freedom *from* speech. Quite the opposite. We are free to consider not only how accurate their description is but also how comprehensive and coherent their overall explanation of Mormonism is.

Stephenson begins by explaining that Christensen “has written a long rambling folksy sounding diatribe about how Mormon apologist Jeff Lindsay’s ‘investigative approach’ is far superior to that of my friend Jeremy Runnells, because Lindsay did not come to a negative conclusion about Mormonism.”

I notice rhetorically helpful words like “diatribe” and “my friend.” Stephenson claims that I favor Lindsay’s approach because of the conclusions he reached. In truth, I favor Lindsay’s approach and example because I see his arguments and evidence as superior. I explicitly cite and mention Lindsay’s “LDS FAQ (for Frequently Asked Questions) which deals with all of the issues that Runnells raised and more. But Lindsay does so both at greater length, over a much broader span of time, consulting a wider range of sources, providing far more documentation, and including far more original research than Runnells.”<sup>6</sup>

If Runnells had offered arguments and evidence that I thought were superior, I could have been persuaded. (And I have often written about how values from Thomas Kuhn and Alma 32 should be employed in measuring superiority in this kind of debate.) But how can I possibly consider them superior when Runnells, to cite one conspicuous example, has nothing whatsoever to account for the Old World correlations in the Book of Mormon? Shall I let him pull a curtain of complete neglect over that? Of my summary of what Lindsay has accomplished since 1994 as compared to what Runnells offered after one year (two at this writing), Stephenson says, “Yes, one would think that someone who has been a Mormon apologist since 1994 and has had a website for that long would have more documentation and research. This is common sense. Yet it doesn’t stop Christensen from using this against Jeremy.” Heaven forbid that anyone would ever use common sense and superior documentation against any arguments that Runnells offers!

Stephenson describes my essay as “basically a set of elaborate strawman arguments, arrogant assumptions and the usual dodgy Mormon apologetic responses to critics.” Okay. Stephenson says, “In his introduction, Christensen calls Runnells ‘obsessive’ and contrasts that

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6 Kevin Christensen, “Eye of the Beholder,” 176.

with Lindsay's 'boundless enthusiasm.' It is obvious where this is going right from the start." My obviousness seems to be a quality that goes against the grain of a claim that I am disingenuous.

Point of fact: Runnells describes his CES letter as the result of "an absolute rabid obsession with Joseph Smith and Church history."<sup>7</sup> I would have that thought that my repeating and quoting his self-description was not an academic crime. I was not attempting any shade of *ad hominem*, just being a reporter. Oddly enough, Stephenson does not mention my quotation of Runnells's self-description. Dare I call this a spin of omission?

He continues: "Recently, Jeremy and I completed a 458-page response to Brian Hales' attacks on him and others. One hopes that this might be enough to satisfy those like Christensen, but he will probably complain that it is too long."

It really depends on the quality of the content, doesn't it? I have, as it happens, read many lengthy books. Some of them I like a great deal and I have even re-read them. Length and persuasiveness are not the same thing. Nor are scandalous topics and foundational topics necessarily the same thing, nor, in my view, deserving of the same effort.

Stephenson says "Christensen claims in his essay that people are human and they evolve. But he won't give that to Jeremy in this instance." Actually, I do explicitly grant that to Runnells. And I invite both Runnells and Stephenson to continue to evolve in their views. Where they charge me with deliberate dishonesty, I said of Runnells:

And I understand how background assumptions shape his reactions to the information he does select to emphasize. Even so, I don't think that he is being intentionally deceptive, or betraying my trust. And my experience has been that those less-than-omniscient Sunday School teachers and manual writers, or whomever, who did not tell him about those sources and details, probably did not know either. It's just people being people as I have learned to expect them to behave, doing the best that they could, according to their lights and given their resources, rather than certifiably omniscient people violating a sacred trust by withholding information.<sup>8</sup>

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7 Runnells, "Letter to a CES Director," 5, in Christensen, "Eye of the Beholder," 176.

8 Christensen, "Eye of the Beholder," 203.

Stephenson says, of my use of language regarding Runnells, that “He is ‘brittle’ (seventeen times) and ‘bitter’ because he does not accept Mormon apologetic spin and obfuscation.”

I searched my essay and I find the word *brittle* five times, which by my count, is not seventeen, and in context not always directed at Runnells in particular.<sup>9</sup> Apparently Stephenson searched the online version of my article but did not check the instances individually to see the context nor notice that twelve instances of *brittle* happened in the online discussion of my essay,<sup>10</sup> not the essay itself.

I use the word “brittle” in my essay not because Runnells rejects “Mormon apologetic spin and obfuscation,” but because in my view Runnells demonstrates mental brittleness in dealing with non-traditional readings and the contextual reframing that invites such readings. He does not consider the implications of my Ian Barbour quotation that “a network of hypothesis and observations is always tested together. Any particular hypothesis can be maintained by rejecting or adjusting other auxiliary hypothesis.”<sup>11</sup> Runnells puts new wine in old bottles, and complains that the bottle shatters and the wine spills.<sup>12</sup> He rejects our offer of more durable and appropriate new wine bottles on grounds they are not old wine bottles. I quoted Joseph Smith on the nature of some saints to “shatter like glass”<sup>13</sup> upon encountering anything contrary to their traditional thinking, another image that applies to the Runnells’s account and suggests the word *brittle* to my mind.

Stephenson complains again of my reference to Lindsay’s twenty-plus years of substance and original research, complaining that “For this to be a really accurate comparison, he needs to give Jeremy another 18 or so years to catch up. But since when has FairMormon and its apologists ever been fair?”

Lovely rhetorical question, don’t you think? Blanket insinuation and condemnation about FairMormon without any need to consider specific individuals or address specific arguments. Is the issue acquiring more

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9 For “brittle” see Christensen, “Eye of the Beholder,” 177, 232, and 234 (3x).

10 See <http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/eye-of-the-beholder-law-of-the-harvest-observations-on-the-inevitable-consequences-of-the-different-investigative-approaches-of-jeremy-runnells-and-jeff-lindsay/>

11 See Christensen, “Eye of the Beholder,” 215, citing Ian Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms: A Comparative Study in Science and Religion* (NY: Harper & Row, 1974), 99.

12 See Christensen, “Eye of the Beholder,” 178, citing Matthew 9:17.

13 See Christensen, “Eye of the Beholder,” 232–233, citing Joseph Fielding Smith, ed. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (SLC: Deseret Book, 1938), 331.

truth (that is, gaining better knowledge of things as they are, were, and are to come<sup>14</sup>) or fairness? Should we never have to deal with people who know more and have more experience in some area than we do? Should we outlaw parents or teachers or scholars or doctors or plumbers, for example, on the grounds that their experience, effort, training and tools provide an unfair competitive advantage over their children, pupils, readers, patients, or customers?<sup>15</sup>

### **Before Perception: The Importance of Perspective**

The point of a comparison between Runnells and Lindsay is to actively try to help readers understand religious debates in general by considering the nature of differing approaches and their different results in relation to faith questions. The difference in their efforts, observations, assumptions, and conclusions provide a modern illustration of the insight and relevance of the Parable of the Sower. (Stephenson nowhere reports that the Parable of the Sower is foundational to my approach.) The same seeds (words) can produce widely different harvests, depending on the soil and nurture.<sup>16</sup> Do not Lindsay's different soil and nurture lead to a different harvest, regarding the same issues that so trouble Runnells? Do not mine? And consider that at some point in our personal histories, Jeff Lindsay, Mike Ash, Neal Rappleye, Daniel Peterson, and many others, including yours truly, had spent less time exploring faith questions than Runnells has now. Something different in our approaches got us past the point where Runnells lost faith and kept us going for years afterwards. We did not just passively accept what we were taught in "approved" books and meetings, and we did not shatter on our encounters with critical sources. We even make original contributions to LDS scholarship. And, contra Stephenson, the difference is not just a youthful spiritual experience. In a previous volume of *Interpreter*, I reviewed a book in which the author reported his loss of faith despite an impressive spiritual experience.<sup>17</sup> One of my comments in the *Interpreter* discussion of my "Eye of the Beholder" essay points out: "Having had a spiritual experience may give one person some reason to have patience with unresolved questions,

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14 See D&C 93:24.

15 On this theme, read Kurt Vonnegut Jr., "Harrison Bergeron," at [http://wordfight.org/bnw/bnw-unit\\_packet.pdf](http://wordfight.org/bnw/bnw-unit_packet.pdf)

16 Matthew 13:3–23, Mark 4:3–20.

17 Kevin Christensen, "Sophic Box and Mantic Vista: A Review of *Deconstructing Mormonism*," *Interpreter* 7 (2013): 113–179.



but another person may find that unresolved questions leads them to dismiss their spiritual experience.”<sup>18</sup>

Nowhere have I argued that because I had a spiritual experience when I was 19, Runnells must be wrong, so I don’t have to reply to his arguments.<sup>19</sup> I have done a significant amount of reading in my life. My arguments were based on what I learned from books and life experience because I can more easily convey such information to another person. I could also point to another excellent response to the “Letter to a CES Director” by the well-informed Neal Rappleye, who is three years younger than Runnells.<sup>20</sup> Is that fair to consider, or does his three-year age advantage mean that Runnells should grant Rappleye’s arguments special immunity from serious criticism or consideration?

It bears remembering that much of the information that people like Lindsay and I sought and found has become much easier and more economical to find these days. I got started decades before the Internet, when it took more than an Internet connection to track down information. But even with the potential advantage provided by the Internet and several decades of additional research and many important publications, a person seeks and finds or does not seek and does not find. A person seeks to “make a man an offender for a word” (Isaiah 29:21) or seeks with “readiness of mind ... whether those things were so” (Acts 17:11). And where a person seeks, what they are looking for, how they process the information they find, and how they respond to what they find along the way, all matters to both the course their journey takes and where they end up.

Stephenson has this:

An observation: I noticed that Christensen has provided links to various places in his notes, like to FairMormon and to

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18 Kevin Christensen, comment, 18 June, 2014, <http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/eye-of-the-beholder-law-of-the-harvest-observations-on-the-inevitable-consequences-of-the-different-investigative-approaches-of-jeremy-runnells-and-jeff-lindsay/>

19 Stephenson quotes a FairMormon Podcast interview with me. It is of interest that he takes my testimony regarding something that happened more than 40 years ago at face value, without bothering to check for contemporary reports in newspapers, radio, or TV, or confirming witnesses. Nor does he seek out every time I told the story to probe for potential contradictions.

20 See Neal Rappleye, “An Open Letter to Jeremy Runnells” part 1, <http://www.studioetquoquefide.com/2014/08/an-open-letter-1-to-jeremy-runnells.html> and “An Open Letter to Jeremy Runnells” part 2, <http://www.studioetquoquefide.com/2014/08/an-open-letter-2-to-jeremy-runnells.html>.

Runnells' works. The ones to FairMormon are all active, while the ones to Runnells' works are all inactive. (That means you have to copy the address and put it into your browser if you want to go to it).

I find this tactic Orwellian and shady. Anything to make it harder to get information Christensen/apologists do not want their readers to access. What kind of equation could we write for that kind of mentality, I wonder?

I imagine that if Winston Smith, the unfortunate protagonist of George Orwell's *1984*, was threatened with the need to copy addresses for his browser searches, rather than, say, pursuit by Secret Police, imprisonment, malnutrition, physical abuse, and a face cage containing hungry rats, he might have found himself far more able to resist the pressure to conform to Big Brother. Winston Smith's dystopian world did not include Google, nor anything remotely comparable to the Joseph Smith Papers project. But who knows? Perhaps the need to copy and paste is a fate worse than death to some. What equation accounts for that mentality?

### **Opening the Curtain on Different Equations**

Stephenson complains about the equations with which I set out my basic approach. My intent was to describe how Runnells appears to deal with information. Here is my first equation:

Runnells (or anyone) + Questions + Facts = Inevitable Final  
Negative Conclusion

Stephenson offers his revision of my equation, stating that this brings us closer to "truth and reality."

Jeremy Runnells (or anyone) + Questions + Facts (not  
Apologist spin) = Conclusion that Joseph Smith and the  
Church are not what they claim to be based on evaluating the  
evidence.

That Stephenson can suppose that by attaching his parenthetical "not apologist spin" he gets us closer to "truth and reality" is wonderfully revealing. To Runnells and Stephenson, spin and ideology is apparently something that happens to other people. Facts are self-evident and evidence speaks for itself. The side we are on is alone enough to demonstrate whether a person is right or wrong. It is also clear that

Stephenson's revision amounts to an affirmation that my description was accurate albeit while insisting that Runnells's approach to facts is correct.

What Stephenson urges on his readers here is a form of thinking that Ian Barbour describes in *Myths, Models, and Paradigms*: "During the 1930s and 1940s there was a wide acceptance of the positivist contention that science starts from indubitable data which can be described in a *neutral observation* language independent of all theories."<sup>21</sup>

But since that time, Barbour explains, philosophers of science such as Kuhn, Hanson, Polanyi, and Feyerband looked more carefully at the real work of scientists and realized that:

*There are no bare uninterpreted data.* Expectations and conceptual commitments influence perceptions, both in everyday life and in science. Man supplies the categories of interpretation, right from the start. The very language in which observations are reported is influenced by prior theories ... The presuppositions which the scientist brings to his inquiry are reflected in the way he formulates a problem, the kind of apparatus he builds, and the type of variable he considers important. Here the emphasis is on *theory* and the way it permeates observation.

In N. R Hanson's oft quoted words, '*All Data are theory-laden.*' The procedures of measurement and the interpretation of the resulting measurement and interpretation of the resulting numerical values depend in implicit theoretical assumptions. Most of the time, scientists work within a framework of thought which they have inherited ... But, says Feyerband, when the background theory itself is an issue, when the fundamental assumptions and basic concepts are under attack, then the dependence of measurement on theoretical assumptions is crucial.<sup>22</sup>

This understanding is exactly what Stephenson fails to address and consider anywhere in his response. In debates about religion, background theory is the issue, fundamental assumptions and basic concepts are at stake, and therefore, the dependence of measurement and observation on those assumptions is crucial. This theory-dependence was exactly

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21 Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms*, 94.

22 Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms*, 95.

the reason for, and substance of, my whole approach. It is why I cited the Parable of the Sower and the Parable of the Wine Bottles. It's why I cite Kuhn and Barbour and Goff. My response to Runnells's use of a Roman Britain paradigm as a basis for his expectations for equally distinctive Nephite evidence in New York demonstrates exactly this issue in operation. That Stephenson appears to appreciate none of this suggests either that he is arguing in bad faith or that he has completely failed to follow my argument. Kuhn says: "Obviously then, there must be a conflict between the paradigm that discloses anomaly [consider Runnells's Roman Britain model] and the one that later renders the anomaly law-like" [compare Brant Gardner's 'The Social History of the Early Nephites' at FairMormon.]<sup>23</sup>

The whole concept of paradigm debate and the influence of theory on experiment design, testing, and interpretation has also been a prominent theme in my LDS writings since my first publication in 1990. And Stephenson's conspicuous failure to address that basic underlying premise means that the beam in his own eye remains in place to obscure his vision. Everything that follows in his essay suffers thereby.

My second equation is my own frank acknowledgment of how all data is theory-laden:

Investigator [+/-] Preconceptions/(Adaptive or Brittle interpretive framework) x (Questions generated + Available facts/Selectivity + Contextualization + Subjective weighting for significance/Breadth of relevant knowledge) \* Time = Tentative Conclusion<sup>24</sup>

Notice that my second equation has general application, not just pointed at one side of the debates, but toward everyone involved. I am an investigator. We are all investigators. It is not that something like what he calls apologetic spin cannot exist. It is, rather, that he does not comprehend that his thinking is inescapably under exactly the same kinds of influence, i.e., his own obvious spin. Everyone has preconceptions that

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<sup>23</sup> Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1970), 97. For the Roman Britain paradigm for Book of Mormon evidence, see Runnells, "Letter to a CES Director," 8, quoted in Christensen, "Eye of the Beholder," 208-209. For Gardner, see <http://www.fairmormon.org/perspectives/fair-conferences/2001-fair-conference/2001-a-social-history-of-the-early-nephites>

<sup>24</sup> Christensen, "Eye of the Beholder," 177. Compare my discussion in "Paradigms Crossed," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 7/2 (1995): 187-208.

affect the questions they ask and what they can even imagine. Everyone's approach is mediated through paradigm-directed selectivity and given currently available information. Everyone contextualizes in ways that influence meaning. And everyone subjectively weighs the results of their inquiries based on a combination of their personal desires and expectations, the breadth of their knowledge and the time they spend. And because we all come short of omniscience, all of our conclusions ought to be somewhat tentative. As Alma 32 explains, our "cause to believe," whatever it is at any given moment, always falls short of perfect knowledge.

But Stephenson misses the universality of our common condition and writes this: "First, to really be accurate here .. the second equation should say 'Apologist,' not investigator, since Christensen is not speaking about investigators but, in his own words."

Well, I disagree with his subsequent digression, but more to the point, I find it utterly misdirected. In my second equation, I was emphatically speaking about everyone, not just apologists. But I don't think he is being dishonest, disingenuous, schizophrenic; or laboring under deceptive or arrogant assumptions. I think his assumptions are faulty, yes. I don't think he's reading my argument correctly or grasping the concepts at issue. And his failure to do so may also call into question his ability to parse the other data about which he makes blithely confident declarations.

Stephenson says, "Christensen seems to forget that he is an apologist for a Church which claims that Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon by 'the gift and power of God' with a peepstone that he put in a hat so he could see the shiny letters that somehow appeared on the stone. This same Church that wants you to read the Book of Mormon and make a decision on its truthfulness based on some kind of a spiritual experience. The same way that Christensen claimed to know that Moroni was real."

Likewise, Stephenson seems to forget that he is an apologist for Jeremy Runnells and their mutual unfaith, which claims that Joseph Smith fabricated the Book of Mormon. Their conclusions are at as much risk of bias and distortion as mine are — but Stephenson apparently cannot see this. He is objective and rational; all who disagree are merely schizophrenic apologists.

Notice the rhetorical effects that Stephenson applies, juxtaposing "gift and power of God" with the skeptical outsider term "peepstone."

The Book of Mormon recommendation for deciding on the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon is much more complex, interesting, and viable than the one Stephenson's report provides. We read in Alma 32:35-38:

[A]nd now behold, after ye have tasted this light is your knowledge perfect? Behold I say unto you, Nay; neither must ye lay aside your faith, for ye have only exercised your faith to plant the seed that ye might try the experiment to know if the seed was good.

And behold, as the tree beginneth to grow, ye will say: Let us nourish it with great care, that it may get root, that it may grow up, and bring forth fruit unto us. And now behold, if ye nourish it with much care it will get root, and grow up, and bring forth fruit.

But if ye neglect the tree, and take no thought for its nourishment, behold it will not get any root; and when the heat of the sun cometh and scorcheth it, because it hath no root it withers away, and ye pluck it up and cast it out.

Alma calls for experimenting upon the word, the goal of the experiments being to enlighten the understanding, to expand the mind, to increase our ability to discern and comprehend what we read. Compare this passage in Alma with this from Kuhn:

At the start a new candidate for a paradigm may have few supporters, and on occasions the supporters' motives may be suspect. Nevertheless, if they are competent, they will improve it, explore its possibilities, and show what it would be like to belong to the community and be guided by it. And as that goes on, if the paradigm is one destined to win its fight, the number and strength of persuasive arguments in its favor will increase.<sup>25</sup>

My personal experiments extended far beyond a momentary spiritual experience at age 19. After an intellectual awakening during my mission, (in 1974, reading Nibley's *An Approach to the Book of*

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25 Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 159. Compare John Clark, "Archeological Trends and Book of Mormon Origins," *BYU Studies* 44/4 (2005): 83-104.

*Mormon* on a P-day in Morecambe, Lancashire), I subsequently began a serious effort in the succeeding four decades to become better informed and to keep abreast of LDS scholarship and critical arguments. I have learned many things from a range of scholars that impress me, not just adding bricks to my existing stack of preconceptions, but sometimes radically changing the paradigm I had previously adopted. Occasionally I found that I could make some original contributions. I compared Alma's conversion with modern near-death experience accounts and aftereffects, leading to a Sunstone talk, and a 1993 *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* essay. Before that work, I could wonder, were Paul and Alma too special? Later in 1999, I listened to Howard Storm's NDE account. Did the non-LDS former atheist Howard Storm plagiarize Alma while nearly dying in France? I saw that Storm's conversion from atheist to Christian and his subsequent changed thought, behavior, and expression resembled Alma's far more than Alma's did Paul's. I saw that Alma demonstrates in detail an authentic response to a recurrent kind of human experience. My puzzlement led to a satisfying solution, rather than to increased dissonance. On a different track, I noticed how closely Mircea Eliade's description of the ancient Year Rite matched the events in 3 Nephi.<sup>26</sup> (Did Eliade borrow from Joseph Smith in writing *Cosmos and History: Myth of Eternal Return*?) I compared the epistemology in Alma 32 to Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. I read Robert Alter on *The Art of Biblical Narrative* and let that illuminate my reading of the stories of women in the Book of Mormon. I compared the scholarship of Margaret Barker on First Temple theology to the content of the Book of Mormon. Even Margaret was surprised and impressed. I have published several things in a range of journals and books, including an essay in a volume from Oxford University Press. During those years, as I felt prepared, I began testing my own expanding world view against a wide range of skeptical writings and perspectives. I read Brodie, the Tanners, *Wife No. 19*, *The Godmakers*, *Indian Origins and the Book of Mormon*, the Roberts Study, *View of the Hebrews*, *New Approaches to Book of Mormon Study*, *American Apocrypha*, *The New Mormon Challenge*, *Deconstructing Mormonism*, and several others.

Stephenson and Runnells fail to mention this personal intellectual effort on my part in accounting for my commitments. Neither does Stephenson recognize that Jeff Lindsay is a working scientist with a PhD.

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26 See Kevin Christensen, review of *Indian Origins and the Book of Mormon* by Dan Vogel, *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 2 (1990): 248–253.

It is just possible that mentioning that sort of thing would undercut their portrait of LDS apologists as money-seeking spin doctors.

Remember that in his “Letter to a CES Director” Runnells had complained:

I was amazed to learn that, according to these unofficial apologists, translate doesn’t really mean translate, horses aren’t really horses (they’re tapirs), chariots aren’t really chariots (since tapirs can’t pull chariots without wheels), steel isn’t really steel, Hill Cumorah isn’t really in New York (it’s possibly in Mesoamerica), Lamanites aren’t really the principal ancestors of the Native American Indians, marriage isn’t really marriage (if they’re Joseph’s marriages? They’re just mostly non-sexual spiritual sealings), and prophets aren’t really prophets (only when they’re heretics teaching today’s false doctrine).<sup>27</sup>

I quoted this statement by Runnells in my essay because I thought it was a good snapshot of Runnells’s mental and emotional responses. I find that the passage is informative and instructive from several angles. In addition to the comments I made in my “Eye of the Beholder” essay, I also notice that Barbour’s observations show that progress in science via paradigm shift typically involves exactly the kind of transformation in meaning that so disturbs Runnells in religion. Here is more from Ian Barbour to compare with the statement in Runnells: “Feyerband maintains that in the switch from Newtonian physics to relativity there was a *change in meaning* of all the basic terms. Time, length, mass, velocity, even the notion of simultaneity, were redefined in the new system.”<sup>28</sup>

And what drives that *change in meaning* are the factors included in my second equation: changes in subjectivity, selectivity, context, expectations, and time. Stephenson and Runnells refuse to consider or accept the advantages of recognizing that such changes in meaning derive from subjectivity, selectivity, context, time, and expectations. By labeling it “apologetic spin,” and presumptuously proclaiming that their own beliefs come from simply facing facts, they provide their own rather unimaginative spin. As Stephenson reports, “By the time I was 18 I had over a thousand books in my library. I met Hugh Nibley and went to

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27 Runnells, *Letter to a CES Director*, 80; quoted in Christensen, “Eye of the Beholder,” 233.

28 Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms*, 95.



BYU and went on a mission. All of that made little difference when I discovered evidence that I was able to evaluate without all the apologetic spin.”

For my part, I have been enlightened and felt my mind expand as I encountered such changes in meaning: when I learned the definitions of *translate*, when I read of the evidence for horses as we understand them and the possibilities in the common practice of loan shift; that the Hebrew for chariot means “riding thing” and does not require wheels; that steel swords have been found in ancient Israel dating to Lehi’s times, also that the word *steel* was applied to what we now call steel because a pre-existing word meant “to harden”; that New World languages preserve words for metals that predate most of the known evidence for metals; that in correlating the Book of Mormon to real-world locations, there is a correspondence between the availability of ores in specific locations and the mention of metals in the text corresponding to those locations; that if you bother to Google “Olmec Iron” you easily find evidence that seldom gets accounted for by critics; that the Book of Mormon descriptions of Cumorah/Ramah do not fit the New York hill; that the Grijalva is the only river in the Western hemisphere that fits the textual description of the Sidon; that “principal ancestors” was never binding scripture or doctrine justified by a close reading of the text, but a disputed choice by a mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century editorial committee’s introduction; that when I looked for myself back in 1995,<sup>29</sup> I found many indications of “Nephi’s Neighbors,” and Matt Roper found even more;<sup>30</sup> that patent-holding LDS DNA scientists knew far more about the significance of DNA and the complications of New World ancestry in the Book of Mormon than the critics; that DNA testing has so far failed to demonstrate that any of Joseph Smith’s plural wives bore him children; and that there are twenty-eight biblical tests for true and false prophets that I find helpful in improving my judgment of what is and is not significant in testing them.

It turns out that Stephenson’s second equation is a drastic replacement of mine. Unlike his first equation, it is not a revision of mine or even a considered response to mine. He replaces my equation’s general applicability to all people on all sides of any debates with a narrow set of claims directed only at Mormon apologists, implicitly suggesting that none of this applies to him.

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29 See Christensen, “Paradigms Crossed,” 165–170.

30 See Matthew Roper, “Nephi’s Neighbors: Book of Mormon Peoples and Pre-Columbian Populations,” *FARMS Review* 15/2 (2003): 91–128.

Mormon Apologists + Faithful Version of Church + Facts  
 doctored by apologetic spin + Cognitive dissonance +  
 Testimony (vested interest, monetary compensation, lifestyle  
 choice, family, church activity/religious gratification etc.) =  
 Conclusion that the Church is true and critics are wrong.

In this view, apologists's facts are doctored by apologetic spin powered by financial and social incentives, and the implication is that, in contrast, critics like Runnells see unadulterated, self-evident facts. We should look at the disrespect given to testimony (which is dismissed as merely tied to social pressures, as if there were no social pressures in Stephenson's and Runnells's anti-Mormon circles). He provides a healthy dose of *ad hominem*, including the ironic charge of "monetary compensation" as motive. For the record, I get nothing from my apologetic writing, and LDS membership is expensive, restrictive, time-consuming, and unpopular from the point of view of the larger society. If anything, I have an ongoing financial and social incentive to abandon my faith. I live in one of the lower per-capita LDS areas in the United States, far away from most of my family. Nothing in Stephenson's replacement equation addresses or even acknowledges the existence or the effect any of the general issues I brought up in mine.

Would it be fair, one wonders, to point out and dismiss Stephenson's and Runnells's abandonment of their faith because of potential secular rewards? Does it matter that Runnells himself is making efforts to be paid for his full-time work on the CES Letter, becoming in essence a paid professional anti-Mormon apologist? "I'm willing to work full-time on just the CES Letter project," he tells donors, "if there's enough monthly support — until I have completed all of the needed tasks to get the CES Letter project where it needs to be."<sup>31</sup>

If the charge that making money biases authors is fair, as Runnells and Stephenson appear to believe when falsely applied to "apologists" who make no money, why should we listen to them when Runnells *does* seek to make a living at such things? And, if it isn't fair to apply this reasoning to Runnells and Stephenson, why is it permissible for them to appeal to such claims against their opponents?

Frankly, what Stephenson provides here is an ideological smear, obvious propaganda, rather than a considered analysis. It involves no

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31 <http://cesletter.com/ces-letter-at-the-crossroads-faqs.html> (accessed 15 June 2015).

self-reflection, no consideration of even the possibility of eye-beams before launching into a blanket assault on Mormon “apologists.”

### **The Art of Dissonance Management: Labeling Versus Comprehension**

Stephenson says: “Christensen appears to be unable to grasp that flexibility does not change facts while cognitive dissonance can allow you to live with and ignore them.”<sup>32</sup>

In this view, I demonstrate cognitive dissonance; they don’t. They perceive the facts; I don’t. And cognitive dissonance, whatever that is (Stephenson does not explain), is something that explains how I both live with and ignore facts.

It would be helpful to define terms.<sup>33</sup> Cognition is “the action or faculty of knowing,” that is “the acquisition and possession of empirical factual knowledge.” Dissonance is “a lack of agreement.” Wikipedia provides a helpful explanation of the combined term as referring to: “mental stress or discomfort experienced by an individual who holds two or more contradictory beliefs, ideas, or values at the same time, or is confronted by new information that conflicts with existing beliefs, ideas, or values.”

Leon Festinger’s theory of cognitive dissonance focuses on how humans strive for internal consistency. An individual who experiences inconsistency (dissonance) tends to become psychologically uncomfortable, and is motivated to try to reduce this dissonance — as well as actively avoid situations and information likely to increase it.<sup>34</sup>

The use of “cognitive dissonance” theory as a rhetorical tool in LDS circles began in 1990. Edward Ashment, in “Reducing Dissonance: The Book of Abraham as a Case Study” invoked the notion of “cognitive dissonance” theory as an explanation of Mormon apologetic behavior.<sup>35</sup>

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32 Stephenson, “The Sky is Falling.”

33 I’ll use *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford, Clarendon Press 1993), in two volumes.

34 Wikipedia, s.v., “Cognitive Dissonance,” online at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cognitive\\_dissonance](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cognitive_dissonance)

35 Edward H. Ashment, “Reducing Dissonance: The Book of Abraham as a Case Study” in *The Word of God: Essays on Mormon Scripture*, ed. Dan Vogel (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990), 221–35. Interesting to compare John Gee and Stephen D. Ricks “Historical Plausibility: The Historicity of the Book of Abraham as

He drew on Festinger's study of the responses of William Miller's followers when his predictions for the Millennium came and went. Ashment reports on "disillusionment [as] a manifestation of cognitive dissonance" of Millers followers as a manifestation "which occurs when the opposite of a belief follows from the premise on which it is based."<sup>36</sup>

At a FAIR conference in 2005, LDS psychologist Wendy Ulrich explored the term.

Decades ago Leon Festinger created cognitive dissonance theory to explain why people hold on to religious beliefs despite the failed prophecies of their leaders. He found that many members of a group he studied who anticipated the end of the world on a given date actually became even more committed when the date came and went with no apocalypse in sight.<sup>37</sup>

Ulrich goes on to explain alternate theories, and comments on a detail that Ashment mentions but for which he does not see the key significance.

People who put cognitive dissonance forward as the explanation for the high level of commitment and sacrifice among some Mormons ignore that by the time the prophecy of the world ending in Festinger's study had failed three times virtually everyone left the group, cognitive dissonance theory or no. People may rationalize their behavior and beliefs for a time, but they will not continue to do so indefinitely unless their beliefs are producing the expected payback—as long as they have reasonable choices about what to believe.<sup>38</sup>

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a Case Study" in *Historicity and the Latter-day Saint Scriptures*, ed. Paul Hoskisson (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 2001), 63–98, and William Schryver, "The Meaning of the Kirtland Egyptian Papers" FAIR Conference 2010, Part 1, <http://www.fairmormon.org/perspectives/fair-conferences/2010-fair-conference/2010-the-meaning-of-the-kirtland-egyptian-papers-part-i>, and Part 2, <http://www.fairmormon.org/perspectives/fair-conferences/2010-fair-conference/2010-the-meaning-of-the-kirtland-egyptian-papers-part-ii>

36 Ashment, "Reducing Dissonance," 221.

37 Wendy Ulrich, "Believest thou ...?': Faith, Cognitive Dissonance, and the Psychology of Religious Experience," FAIR Conference, 2005, <http://www.fairmormon.org/perspectives/fair-conferences/2005-fair-conference/2005-believest-thou-faith-cognitive-dissonance-and-the-psychology-of-religious-experience>

38 Ulrich, *Ibid.*

Stephenson does not recognize the existence of significant payback in my intellectual biography or among LDS apologists in general. That means that I experience dissonance when comparing my actual history to his portrait. And as Ian Barbour explains: “Religious paradigms, like scientific ones, are not falsified by data, but are replaced by promising alternatives. Commitment to a paradigm allows its potentialities to be systematically explored, but it does not exclude reflective evaluation.”<sup>39</sup>

Ashment cited Festinger for “several ways a person may try to reduce dissonance:”

1. “change one or more of the beliefs, opinions, or behaviors involved in the dissonance”;
2. “acquire new information or beliefs that will increase the existing consonance and thus cause the total dissonance to be reduced”; or
3. “forget or reduce the importance of those cognitions that are in a dissonance relationship.”<sup>40</sup>

This reminds me of Thomas Kuhn’s description of three different ways that science handles key anomalies that lead to paradigm crisis. The order is different, but the ideas are similar.

- First, normal science handles the crisis.
- Second, the problem is labeled and set aside for a future generation.
- Third, a new paradigm emerges with the ensuing battle for acceptance.<sup>41</sup>

All of this digression is to explain that Stephenson does not use the term *cognitive dissonance* correctly. For him cognitive dissonance provides the means by which apologists like me ignore “facts.” But cognitive dissonance refers to the discomfort a person feels upon encountering facts that don’t fit their expectations: the more significant the fact, the more discomfort, and the greater the need to resolve the tension in some way. So cognitive dissonance is an uncomfortable response to some fact or event or circumstance and, by definition, is not the means

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39 Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms*, 172.

40 Leon Festinger, Henry W. Riecken, and Stanley Schachter, *When Prophecy Fails: A Social and Psychological Study of a Modern Group that Predicted the Destruction of the World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1956), 26, as quoted in Ashment, “Reducing Dissonance,” 221.

41 Adapted from Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 84.

to make such discomfort go away. If a person makes the uncomfortable facts go away by ignoring their existence or by accounting for them by means of a working paradigm, he or she then experiences no cognitive dissonance. So to be accurate Stephenson ought to talk about *dissonance management* in light of Festinger's cognitive dissonance theory. And it would help, as Ulrich does, to mention competing theories that include the importance of ongoing rewards that support commitment, or, as Kuhn says, "fruitfulness" and an ongoing consideration of which "problems are more significant to have solved."<sup>42</sup> For example, in their separate responses to the CES letter, Daniel Peterson and Neal Rappleye both mentioned Old World evidences for the Book of Mormon that Runnells does not address. That important omission on Runnells's part turns out to be a demonstration of dissonance management. Once again, Runnells and Stephenson are at least as vulnerable to the intellectual sins they discern in their opponents.

Kuhn talks about the importance of being able to deal with the ongoing mismatches between expectation and measurements. He refers to normal science as "puzzle solving" in which the point of ongoing research is to find solutions within the current paradigm. "[E]very problem that normal science sees as a puzzle can be seen, from another viewpoint, as a counterinstance, and thus as a source of crisis,"<sup>43</sup> that is, you could say, a source of cognitive dissonance. "[S]ome men have undoubtedly been driven to desert science because of their inability to tolerate crisis. Like artists, creative scientists must occasionally be able to live in a world out of joint ... the 'essential tension' is implicit in scientific research ... the puzzles that constitute normal science exist only because no paradigm that provides a basis for scientific research ever completely resolves all its problems."<sup>44</sup>

That is, there are always facts that don't fit the paradigm, always something that generates "cognitive dissonance" if you care to look. (If Runnells and Stephenson see no problem with their current stance, that is strong evidence that they haven't looked at it very closely — much as they claim not to have looked at their Mormon paradigm very closely before their current enlightenment.) And this mismatch between theory and expectation is exactly where the majority of normal scientific research happens. It provides the context for the ongoing work of puzzle definition and puzzle solving. One of the criteria for a competing

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42 Ibid., 110.

43 Ibid., 79.

44 Ibid., 78–79.

paradigm is not just that it resolves a few specific puzzles but that “the new paradigm must promise to preserve a relatively large part of the concrete problem-solving ability that has accrued to science through its predecessors.”<sup>45</sup>

I can think of several facts that caused me discomfort when I first encountered them — and many that still do. But as Kuhn observes, there are three possible responses to the existence of those dissonant facts: [1] resolve them within the current framework, [2] defer the solution to a later time, or [3] change to a paradigm that can better account for them. He also states that paradigm choice always involves deciding “Which problems are more significant to have solved?” I’ve used all of these responses and have learned thereby why Kuhn refers to “the essential tension” in science. It is also why Lehi refers to “opposition in all things” (2 Nephi 2:11), and why Joseph Smith observed that “by proving contraries, truth is made manifest.”<sup>46</sup> For instance, one of the things that prepared me to recognize the significance of Margaret Barker’s *Temple Theology* is that I had long been aware of the claim that the Book of Mormon is “too Christian before Christ.”<sup>47</sup> Stephenson uses the label of *cognitive dissonance* as a rhetorical club, as something that only happens to other people, rather than as an occasion for an honest consideration of the beam obscuring his own vision. This tells me much about why he says “Christensen appears to be unable to grasp that flexibility does not change facts while cognitive dissonance can allow you to live with and ignore them.”

Isn’t it ironic that Stephenson misuses the term *cognitive dissonance* as means to manage his own discomfort? One of the key concepts that Stephenson fails to grasp is that “facts” can and do change.

### Approaching Facts and Exposing Ideology

In 1989, Peter Novick, the author of *That Noble Dream: Objectivity and the American History Profession*, spoke to a Sunstone audience that included many LDS historians.<sup>48</sup> His comments illuminate the underlying but unexamined assumptions of Stephenson’s approach to facts.

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45 Ibid., 169.

46 Joseph Smith to L. Daniel Rupp, 5 June 1844, printed in *History of the Church*, 6:428.

47 See Kevin Christensen, “The Deuteronomist De-Christianizing of the Old Testament” *FARMS Review* 16/2 (2004): 59–90.

48 See the account of the context and circumstances of Novick’s talk by Louis Midgely, “Editor’s Introduction: Knowing Brother Joseph Again” *FARMS*

For historians, even more than scientists, a fetishism of “the fact” is one of the hallmarks of the objectivist consciousness. While, early on, historians were confident that they could achieve historical objectivity, later, more chastened generations regarded it as perhaps unattainable but continued to hold it out as an approachable ideal. The conception remained the same: to approximate, if not reach, a neutral, undistorting mirror of the past. [This is precisely what Stephenson and Runnells claim to provide.] An objective account would at least attempt to account for all of the evidence. The goal of the objective historian, even if one could not quite achieve it, was to tell it like it was — if not without preconceptions, with as few as possible, minimizing as much as possible any ulterior didactic motives. Even if one could not completely eliminate partisanship or bias, one could try to keep what remained under as tight a control as possible. If one could not eliminate outside influences, one would struggle against them with all one’s strength. But above all — and if I repeat myself, it is because it bears repetition — the objective historian was to cleave to one goal and one goal only, mirroring to the best of her powers the past as it really was.<sup>49</sup>

That Stephenson depicts himself as facing facts and Mormon apologists as somehow unable to honestly accomplish this essential task shows that he embodies the kind of thinking that Novick addressed. Happily, Novick points out the essential problem with such thinking:

I will only report that to an ever-increasing number of historians in recent decades it has not just seemed unapproachable, but an incoherent ideal; not impossible, in the sense of unachievable (that would not make it a less worthy goal than many other goals that we reasonably pursue), but meaningless. This is not because of human frailty on the part of the historian (that, after all, we can struggle against), not because of irresistible outside pressures (these too we can resist with some success, if not complete success). No, the principal problem is different, and it is laughably simple. It is the problem of selecting from

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Review 18/1 (2006): xlv–lx, at <http://publications.maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/fullscreen/?pub=1446&index=1>

49 Peter Novick, “Why the Old Mormon Historians Are More Objective Than the New,” Sunstone Symposium, 1989, 4 (transcript in my possession).



among the zillions and zillions of bits of historical data out there the handful that we can fit in even the largest book, and the associated problem of how we arrange those bits that we choose. The criterion of selection and the way we arrange the bits we choose are not given out there in the historical record. Neutrality, value-freedom, and absence of preconceptions on the part of the historian would not result in a neutral account, it would result in no account at all, because any historian, precisely to the extent that she was neutral, without values, free of preconceptions, would be paralyzed, would not have the foggiest notion of how to go about choosing from the vast, unbelievably messy chaos of stuff out there.<sup>50</sup>

The criterion of selection and the way that Runnells and his apologists select and arrange the bits of data are not given in the record, nor are they given by the data. The data are always “theory-laden” as Hanson explained. Barbour points out, “Theory is revisable in light of observation, but observation may also sometimes need to be reconsidered in light of theory.”<sup>51</sup> I illustrated that circumstance several times in my response to Runnells, for instance, when I cited Benjamin McGuire’s careful studies of *The Late War*<sup>52</sup> and other claimed sources for the Book of Mormon based on a naïve approach to literary parallels.<sup>53</sup>

Spin is not something that only happens to other people. So one key issue is not whether a person has a guiding ideology, but whether a person is conscious of the implications of their guiding ideology, whether they comprehend the implications of the beam in their own eye before setting out to perform eye surgery on someone else.

As Alan Goff pointed out:

The primary function of an ideology is to conceal from the person who adheres to it the fact that he or she is operating

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50 Novick, *Ibid.*

51 Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms*, 97.

52 Benjamin L. McGuire, “The Late War Against the Book of Mormon,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 7 (2013): 323–355; <http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/the-late-war-against-the-book-of-mormon/>.

53 Benjamin L. McGuire, “Finding Parallels: Some Cautions and Criticisms, Part One,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 5 (2013): 1–59; <http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/finding-parallels-some-cautions-and-criticisms-part-one/>; “Finding Parallels: Some Cautions and Criticisms, Part Two,” 61–104; <http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/finding-parallels-some-cautions-and-criticisms-part-two/>.

under the influence of that ideology. The creed works, in other words, by convincing the subject that he or she knows how the real world works and that the others who disagree are apologists or are otherwise operating under a false set of beliefs: “Ideologies can be seen as more or less systematic attempts to provide plausible explanations and justifications for social behaviour which might otherwise be the object of criticism. These apologia then conceal the truth from others, and perhaps also from the rationalizing subject itself.” An ideology conceals from the ideologue the fact that he or she adheres to a fundamental belief that structures the way he or she experiences the world and attempts to reorganize that world to conform to its preference. Making someone’s ideology explicit is always hazardous because those ideologies are fundamental commitments and work best when they are concealed from the apologist. “Ideologies are actively engaged in furthering ends that are best furthered by not acknowledging their true natures.” So the ideologue — the apologist — must not only conceal from others the ideology at work but must also delude him- or herself.<sup>54</sup>

There is a difference, then, between operating under a set of explicit assumptions and operating under a set of hidden assumptions. We can openly consider the critical implications of explicit assumptions, but not the critical implications of hidden assumptions. And we can flatter ourselves and our ideological allies that we are not governed by any of the biases and assumptions that so afflict our opponents.

Stephenson cannot help but demonstrate how a hidden ideology lurks behind his arguments.

So, point of view determines truth? What does point of view have to do with it?

For years, Joseph Fielding Smith denied that Joseph Smith used his peepstone to translate the Book of Mormon. He also called black people “an inferior race.” Did his evaluation of the evidence and *point of view* make these things true? Or Joseph Fielding Smith a true prophet?

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54 Alan Goff, “Dan Vogel’s Family Romance and the Book of Mormon as Smith Family Allegory,” *FARMS Review* 17/2 (2005): 335–336.

What does Joseph Fielding Smith's denial regarding the historical use of a peepstone (seer stone, if labels applied by the people involved matter) have to do with his being a true prophet? What do his views of race have to do with his being a true prophet? Should I assume that the answers are self-evident, or should I actually ask the question and consider that such a question is most appropriate only from January 23, 1970 to July 2, 1972, when the office of prophet was actually his? I'll hazard the risk of making my own ideology explicit so you can see what happens when I do it.

In my *Interpreter* response to Runnells, I quoted D&C 1:6, 24–28 on the formal limitations on LDS leaders.

Behold, this is my mine authority, and the authority of my servants. ... 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. And inasmuch as they erred, it might be made known; And inasmuch as they sought wisdom, they might be instructed; And inasmuch as they sinned, they might be chastened that they might repent; And inasmuch as they were humble they might be made strong, and blessed from on high and receive knowledge from time to time.

My *Interpreter* essay also referred to my FairMormon essay on “Biblical Keys for Discerning True and False Prophets.”<sup>55</sup> There, I make my own ideology explicit, and therefore, open to critical examination.

#### *Claims a True Prophet Must Make*

- Revelation and Vision
- Witnesses
- Chosen by God
- Ordained by prophesy and the laying on of hands by those in authority

#### *Teaching of Christ*

- Christ ordained by God to judge all men
- Teaches belief on him for remission of sins
- Testifies that Jesus is “come in the flesh”

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55 Kevin Christensen, “Biblical Keys for Discerning True and False Prophets” at [http://en.fairmormon.org/Biblical\\_Keys\\_for\\_Discerning\\_True\\_and\\_False\\_Prophets](http://en.fairmormon.org/Biblical_Keys_for_Discerning_True_and_False_Prophets)

- Apostles and prophets given “till we all come in a unity of the faith”
- Accepts the Biblical God

#### *Character of Teaching*

- Preaches Repentance
- Teaches of one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of all
- Teaches by the spirit, so that your faith stands in the power of God
- Opens understanding of the scriptures
- Teaching consistent with scripture
- Provides knowledge of the heavenly council
- Provides knowledge of the Lord’s covenant
- They teach their followers to expect trials in this life

#### *Personal Character*

- Seeks to please God, not men
- Teaches with authority, and not as a scribe
- They lead as willing ensamples to the flock, not for filthy lucre
- Recognizes and is united with authorized prophets
- They admit to being men of passion, like us, liable to sin

#### *Evidences Provided*

- God bears them witness with signs and gifts of the Holy Ghost according to his own will
- A prophet may do works none other man did
- Teaches that the investigators must keep his words to learn the truth of them.
- Prophecy
- Teaches that we must pray
- Over time, arguments against a prophet fail, and demonstrate confusion

None of the biblical keys condemn Joseph Fielding Smith as a potential prophet. He actually comes out looking very good by these measures. His racial views and mistakes on points of history, his behavior before he became the prophet, and his age and behavior when

he was the prophet, all have a historical context and biblical precedent.<sup>56</sup> According to the biblical criteria and the D&C 1-supported expectations from leaders that I bring to the question, the points Stephenson brings to the question are largely irrelevant.

“By their fruits shall ye know them” refers to the recognition of a characteristic fruit as the key to identification. So if you happen to spot unripe, fallen, bruised, or wormy fruit, if you know the fruit’s identifying characteristics, even they will do. A grape with a blemish is not a thorn, nor is even a perfect thorn any kind of fruit. A fig that has been pecked by a bird is still a fig, and a flawless or fashionably popular thistle is still a just a thistle (see Matthew 7:16–17).

If Stephenson wants to dismiss or reject these biblical criteria, his alternative ideology resorts to a subjective appeal to emotional hot-button issues argued on the unacknowledged basis that Smith represents behavior and attitudes that are “not the way I would arrange it if I were God.” Such an argument suffers from the inescapable limitation that Stephenson is not God. Notice that if Stephenson had openly stated that his use of these criteria depends on the reasoning that the situation is “not the way I would arrange it if I were God,” that opens his reasoning to critical examination in the same way my listing of biblical tests opens them to critical examination. Rather than be swept up by the emotional wave of impassioned disapproval of Joseph Fielding Smith as a person — which flatter the reader as enlightened and demand no mental or emotional effort — such as offered by Stephenson as an apparently objective and decisive set of self-evident facts, he’d have to admit that they are grounded on the claim that if he were God he wouldn’t permit such behavior in a true prophet. The effectiveness of the argument therefore depends on concealing these assumptions and forestalling any undesirable critical consideration from his audience about who is clearly not God.

Many years ago, I made a study of the reasons that biblical peoples gave for rejecting Bible prophets. I came up with about seventy different arguments. I was startled to realize that none of them had gone out of date. Later I realized that they all boiled down to a person saying, “it doesn’t agree with what I think,” or “it’s not what I desire.” While

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56 On the cultural background of the racist teachings, see Stirling Adams, review of *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, by David M. Goldenberg; and *Noah’s Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery*, by Stephen R. Hayes, *BYU Studies* 44/1 (2005): 157–169, <https://byustudies.byu.edu/showtitle.aspx?title=7674>. Consider also Acts 10 and Acts 15.

watching Joseph Campbell on *The Power of Myth*, I was impressed by his explanation that the entrances of ancient temples were guarded by two figures representing Fear (what you think is so, your chosen society's orthodoxy) and Desire (what you want). To enter the Real, you had to be willing to offer up what you think, to admit that you don't know everything already, and admit that what you desire may not actually be the most important thing in the long run, or even good for you and the people you care about. This notion of Fear and Desire as the temple guardians we must pass to enter the Real corresponds to the 3 Nephi 9:20 account of a required sacrifice of a broken heart and a contrite spirit before the listeners gather at the temple. To enter the Real, we have to be willing to offer up what we think and desire. A refusal of the risk shows up in statements that implicitly or explicitly insist, "I won't give up my current thought" and "I won't let go of my current desires."

Stephenson's two arguments here exemplify these basic obstacles to human discovery of what is Real. "It's not what I think. It's not what I want." He argues based on a premise that a prophet wouldn't make or perpetuate a mistake in history. And a prophet wouldn't reflect any of the now embarrassing prejudices of his time and culture.

It happens that Ian Barbour's term for a distinctive type of religious experience is "reorientation and reconciliation,"<sup>57</sup> which is, quite simply, a change in thinking and a change in feeling. Those who will not or cannot offer the sacrifice of a contrite spirit and a broken heart cannot experience the differences brought by reorientation of thinking and a reconciliation of feeling. Mind and heart should both be fully engaged, open to continual repentance. I found that all of the scriptural passages that describe how prayers are answered can be divided according to whether the answer addresses the mind or heart.<sup>58</sup> And it turns out that one of the most conspicuous after-effects of near-death experience is a sense of the importance of love and an increased hunger for knowledge.

So it turns out that everyone has an ideology — and no one more so than those who insist they have none. What can we do about it? The Perry Scheme for Cognitive and Ethical Growth observes a set of responses to the discovery of the relativity of knowledge:

There are seven ways a person can go.

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57 Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms*, 54.

58 See Kevin Christensen "A Model of Mormon Spiritual Experience" [http://dl.dropbox.com/u/22100469/model\\_of\\_experience.pdf](http://dl.dropbox.com/u/22100469/model_of_experience.pdf)

- *Transition 1.* The person can make the transition by modifying dualism drastically to where one no longer trusts authority to have any answers, and they think it will be a long, long time before they will; therefore, there is really no way to be judged by them. Bitterness sets in, as it seems as if rewards don't come by hard work and rightness, but by good expression and arbitrary factors. With an inability to distinguish between abstract thought and "bull", disillusion settles and blinds the person to where they become dangerously cynical and take advantage of any opportunity to get gain.
- *Transition 2.* The person could decide that, if there are so many different answers a[ll] depending on individual perspective, that it is impossible for any true judgment; therefore anything goes. All is of equal value. To have an opinion makes it right.
- *Transition 3.* Same as above, except it dawns that there are some facts that, if known, can make for a better choice among the many.
- *Transition 4.* Anger and frustration win out. Instead of becoming cynical and opportunistic, person acts out negatively.
- *Transition 5.* The person is moving closer to accepting relativity. He trusts authorities to have valid grounds for evaluations. To get along, one needs to accept that authorities are using reasonable information in making their answers. So the person tries to discover what it is authorities think and want.
- *Transition 6.* Person realizes that on some matters, reasonable people reasonably disagree, that knowledge is qualitative and is context-dependent. They begin weighing factors and approaches in ways that force comparison of patterns of thought, they think about thinking and this occupies the foreground. But they still tend to want to conform so much that they have trouble thinking independently.
- *Transition 7.* This position between multiplicity and relativity is now closer to relativity. The person sees that thinking

relatively isn't just what the authorities he has been dealing [with] have reasoned out and want him to accept, it is the way the world works, in most cases.

Now uncertainties or diversities multiply until they tip the balance against certainty and homogeneity, precipitating a crisis that forces the construction of a new vision of the world, be it one marked by cynicism, anxiety, or a new sense of freedom.<sup>59</sup>

### **To Build on Sand or Rock**

Back in 1995, I wrote this:

Opponents in the debates about Mormon history and scripture typically criticize each other for having preconceptions and methods that influence their approach to the evidence. But merely to point out an opponent's assumptions, though it raises issues, neither disproves the opposition's case, nor settles the case for the defense. The current debate needs discussion of the means by which we decide why one set of assumptions and methods should be preferred over another.<sup>60</sup>

Kuhn says it makes a great deal of sense to ask which paradigm is better and which problems are more significant to have solved. Any judgment of "better" requires comparison, a wrestle with the opposition in all things. As Joseph Smith observed, "by proving contraries, truth is made manifest."<sup>61</sup> He did not say to limit our approach to truth by simply asking, "do you preach the orthodox religion?" or "Do you preach the most popular and fashionable secular ideology?" He did not refer anyone to a closed "Big Book of What to Think." To say "better" is to make a value-judgment, and the ideology upon which those judgments are based is important in constructing and making comparisons and subsequent decisions. There is always a danger that the judgment will be self-referential, based on the assumption of that one's paradigm is better, which is the very issue that we ought to be questioning.

Fortunately, Kuhn has identified a set of values that are not paradigm dependent, not self-referential, and serve as constraints to provide a structure for scientific revolutions, i.e., that signal progressive changes in

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59 Email on the Perry Scheme of Cognitive and Ethical Growth, from Veda Hale, online at <http://dl.dropbox.com/u/22100469/Perry%20Scheme.pdf>

60 Christensen "Paradigms Crossed," 148.

61 *History of the Church*, 6:428.



knowledge. The values that Kuhn identifies as underlying the structure of scientific revolutions are comparable to those given in Alma 32: puzzle generation and solution, accuracy of key predictions, comprehensiveness and coherence, fruitfulness, simplicity and aesthetics, and future promise.<sup>62</sup> Greg Smith observes that “it must be admitted that even these depend upon a paradigm under which the world is fundamentally susceptible to rational investigation and analysis, that the search for truth is worthwhile, that puzzle generation and solution are valuable activities, that aesthetics have some relationship to truth and reality, and so forth. Happily, such assumptions are widely shared, and so not subject to much debate in the present case, one hopes.”<sup>63</sup>

So, in my view, it pays to be wary of arguments based on “not what I think, or what my preferred society thinks” or “not what I desire, or what my preferred society desires.” Rather, consider which paradigm better accounts for evidence in terms of puzzle generation and solution, accuracy of key predictions, comprehensiveness and coherence, fruitfulness, simplicity and aesthetics, and future promise.

### Some Specific Complaints: On Revelation to “Others”

So, with the parameters of a productive approach defined, I will now consider some of Stephenson’s specific complaints about my essay. For several years I have read D&C 1:18 as referring to “others” besides Joseph Smith to whom God spoke. He objects as follows: “How can God have given commandments to others when he claims that Joseph Smith and his followers were ‘the *first* laborers in this last kingdom?’”

Priesthood is a distinctive aspect of “this last kingdom,” but not everyone who serves God does so under formal priesthood direction via the church organization, or for that matter, is even known to the church members. In March of 1831, a revelation referred to “holy men that ye know not of” (See D&C 49:8).

There is the issue of formal authority versus good work, and revelation within the formal organization of a church, and revelation and good work outside of the formal church. Matthew 12:30 declares, “He that is not with me is against me; he that gathered not with me, scattereth abroad.” Compare with Mark 9:39: “But Jesus said, forbid him not: for there is no man which shall do a miracle in my name that can lightly speak evil of me. For he that is not against us is on our part.”

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62 Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 152–159, 185–186.

63 Greg Smith, personal correspondence, 16 June 2015.

The difference in the gospel passages has to do with context. The Matthew text describes formal “gathering” by chosen disciples, called to preach and baptize. The Mark text describes how those disciples should accept the performance of good works by anyone, even one not called and ordained as part of the formal gathering.

Stephenson misses the significance of the phrase *this last kingdom*, in comparison to other D&C verses such as 88:36–37, with “and there are many kingdoms; and is no space in which there is no kingdom.” D&C 88:61 refers to “all these kingdoms [plural], and the inhabitants thereof.” D&C 88:51–61 is a parable explaining different kingdoms, in which the Lord visits different laborers each “in his own order, until his hour was finished” (v. 60). Kingdoms have boundaries. Not everything good happens within the boundaries of the formal LDS organization. Sometimes the kingdom is among us, and we do not see it (Luke 17:20–21). The kingdom can be any place where God’s will is “done, in earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10).

Stephenson constructs his context for reading the D&C 1 passage on “others” as referring to the early members in the church. That reading is possible, but the term has an inherent ambiguity in context. In a previous *Interpreter* essay, I offered this instructive set of Book of Mormon quotations that expand the context I bring to my reading:

“the Lord doth grant unto all nations of their own nation and tongue, to teach his word, all that he seeth fit that they should have” (Alma 29:8). Nephi remarks that God “speaketh unto men according to their language, unto their understanding” (2 Nephi 31:3), which explains how “he remembereth the heathen, and all are alike unto God, both Jew and Gentile” (2 Nephi 26:33), how “all things which have been given of God from the beginning of the world unto man are the typifying of him,” (2 Nephi 11:4), and how there are “divers ways that he did manifest things unto the children of men which were good” (Moroni 7:24).<sup>64</sup>

I should have included the description in Alma 32:23 of how “he imparteth his word by angels unto men, yea, not only men, but women also. Now this is not all; little children do have given unto them many times which confound the wise and learned.” My own readings in comparative religion, near death experience research, and personal

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64 Christensen, “Sophic Box and Mantic Vista,” 154–155.

experiences with people of many faiths has left me both confident and comfortable with the notion that God speaks to “others.”

Joseph Smith famously said, “Have the Presbyterians and truth? Yes. Have the Baptists, Methodists, etc., any truth? Yes. They all have a little truth mixed with error. We should gather all the good and true principles in world and treasure them up, or we should not come out true ‘Mormons.’”<sup>65</sup> Notice what happens to Mormon thought itself if you read this statement in light of the formal description of LDS authority in D&C 1. It should be clear that Mormons also get by on truth mixed with error. The issue is, as Joseph Smith expresses it, will we set about to learn the truth of all things, or will we set up stakes, and say, “Hitherto thou shalt come, and no further.”<sup>66</sup> We are people in process in a church in process, subject to ongoing correction, encouraged to continue in our learning.

### Looking at the Vision

Stephenson’s most focused and substantial challenge applies to a specific argument regarding the First Vision. He quotes this passage from me:

Look at his [Jeremy Runnells] complaints about the various First Vision Accounts and the priesthood restoration. On page 22 of his Letter, Runnells claims that “there is absolutely no record of a First Vision prior to 1832.” The FairMormon website response points out an article in the Palmyra *Reflector* from 1831 that indicates discussion of Joseph’s vision as early as November 1830. They also point to the allusion in D&C 20, which dates to April 1830.<sup>67</sup>

In response Stephenson has this:

This is the real issue. Is there any evidence of discussion about the claimed 1820 vision before 1832 when Joseph first penned it? The answer is no. The FairMormon article that Christensen quotes is wrong. Why? Because the two missionaries that the newspaper article describes are referring not to any claimed 1820 vision but rather the visit of Moroni three years later.

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65 Joseph Fielding Smith, ed., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1974), 316.

66 Smith, ed., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 327.

67 Citing Christensen, “Eye of the Beholder, Law of the Harvest,” 204.

Christensen links to a FairMormon article that is not only incorrect but completely deceptive as well.

One check on whether the FairMormon article is correct or deceptive is to read the newspaper article cited. Matt Roper has reproduced the *Reflector* February 14, 1831 for the archive of “19<sup>th</sup>-Century Publications about the Book of Mormon”:<sup>68</sup>

Our Painesville correspondent informs us, that about the first of Nov. last, Oliver Cowdery, (we shall notice this character in the course of our labors,) and three others arrived at that village with the “New Bible,” on a mission to the notorious Sidney Rigdon, who resides in the adjoining town. Rigdon received them graciously — took the book under advisement, and in a few days declared it to be of “Heavenly origin.” Rigdon, with about 20 of his flock, were *dipt* immediately. They then proclaimed that there had been no religion in the world for 1500 years, — that no one had been authorised to preach &c. for that period — that Joe Smith had now received a commission from God for that purpose, and that all such as did not submit to his authority would speedily be destroyed. The world (except the New Jerusalem) would come to an end in two or three years. The state of New-York would (probably) be sunk. *Smith (they affirmed) had seen God frequently and personally* — Cowdery and his friends had frequent interviews with angels, and had been directed to locate the *site* for the New Jerusalem, which they should *know*, the moment they should “step their feet” upon it.

Notice that the newspaper describes four missionaries, not two. Matthew Brown identifies them as “Oliver Cowdery, Parley P. Pratt, Peter Whitmer Jr., and Richard Ziba Peterson.”<sup>69</sup> Why does Stephenson miss this? Well, for one thing, in his essay he doesn’t deal directly with

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68 <http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/BOMP/id/544/rec/1>

69 Matthew B. Brown, *A Pillar of Light: The History and Message of the First Vision* (American Fork: Covenant Communications, 2009), 196. Also compare Richard L. Anderson’s treatment of the same issue and evidence in “Circumstantial Confirmation of the First Vision Through Reminiscences,” *BYU Studies* 9/3 (Spring 1969): 373–404. And for more details on the four missionaries, see Richard Lloyd Anderson, “The Impact of the First Preaching in Ohio,” *BYU Studies* 11/4 (Summer 1971): 474–496.

that specific issue of the *Reflector*. Part of his approach is to look at other newspaper accounts reporting on different LDS missionaries that did not mention theophanies, but rather focused on the more sensational story of the angel and the book.<sup>70</sup> And he compares those accounts with Cowdery's 1834 history, Lucy's later history, and a letter from William McLellan, none of which mention theophany, but focus on the angel and the book. That is, he looks to them as paradigmatic, rather than the one with the clear evidence that contradicts Runnells's original claim of "absolutely no evidence" before 1832. What he does not do is cancel out or explain the reason for the existence of the distinctive themes in the February 1831 *Reflector*. He writes as though reticence and variations in personal knowledge in other reports about such experiences could never be a factor in who said, or reported, what when.

Stephenson says:

Who wrote the 1832 history? Joseph Smith and Frederick Williams. Not Oliver Cowdery. Therefore, Jeremy's argument that Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery made no such claim until 1834 is exactly correct. That is when they both jointly published Joseph's history in a series of letters for the *Messenger and Advocate*. Writing a partial history in secret and abandoning it in the back of a letterbook is not making any "claim". There is absolutely no evidence that Cowdery knew anything about the claimed 1820 vision.

Notice Runnells's argument of "no such claim" regarding the vision, and the use of Boolean logic by Stephenson here to define the problem in terms of a specific combination of people, rather than the most important question, which is, "Did Joseph have a vision in 1820?" I also note his appeal to secrecy regarding the 1832 history and a declaration of "absolutely no evidence" of Cowdery's knowledge. This last runs directly into Matthew Brown's 2009 book, *A Pillar of Light: The History and Message of the First Vision*, which continues a line of thought dating at least to Richard L. Anderson in *BYU Studies* in 1969. Brown quotes Cowdery's declaration that in producing his 1834–1835 histories, he would draw on assistance from Joseph Smith, and use "authentic

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70 He says "in 1832 the *Fredonia Censor* published that two Mormon missionaries, Lyman E. Johnson and Orson Pratt, were teaching" about a prayer, and angel, and Gold plates.

documents now in our possession.”<sup>71</sup> Brown then offers a careful comparison of what Cowdery produced in 1834 with what Joseph Smith and Frederick Williams had created in 1832 and shows that Cowdery actually used the 1832 account. This means, *contra* Stephenson, there is good evidence that Cowdery knew about Joseph’s 1820 vision, which also means, there is good evidence that the statement in the *Reflector* has an authentic source behind it. That source is most likely Cowdery, and therefore the report in the *Reflector* has a reason for existing.<sup>72</sup>

These conclusions raise the question of why Cowdery did not expand on the vision in the 1834-35 articles.<sup>73</sup> Opinions differ on this of course, but Brown and Anderson, among others, have proposed sensible solutions.<sup>74</sup> Any argument that Cowdery knew nothing does not account for the content of *Reflector*’s report from the Painesville correspondent. Nor does it explain Cowdery’s consistent testimony even while out of the church. If a contradiction in Joseph’s accounts is so clear-cut to Runnells and Stephenson at two centuries’ removed, would it not have been even more clear to Oliver Cowdery? Why, then, did Oliver not expose the hoax once he was disaffected from the Church and Joseph?

Stephenson cites accounts by Cowdery, Lucy Smith, and others that did not mention the theophany in the grove, but none of them ever contradicted Joseph’s vision accounts when they had opportunity to do so, even those who separated from the church. Why did the charge that Joseph was late in inventing a theophany not appear until decades after his death? It seems that a certain historical distance was required before such a claim could be at all plausible, since Joseph’s contemporaries had heard the story from very early on.

Stephenson cites the report of William Smith, who appears to mix elements from 1820 and 1824 in an 1883 article. But in the same article, William twice referred to Joseph’s own history: “a more elaborate and accurate description of his vision, however, will be found in his own history,” and “a particular account of his visions and life during this period will be found in his biography, and therefore I will omit it

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71 Oliver Cowdery quoted in Brown, *Pillar of Light*, 110. Also quoted and discussed in Anderson, “Circumstantial Confirmation,” 393–398.

72 See discussion in Brown, *A Pillar of Light*, 110–112, and detailed comparison, 217–220.

73 See, among others, Brown, *A Pillar of Light*, 110–112. Also Anderson, “Circumstantial Confirmation,” 393–398.

74 Also see Roger Nicholson, “The Cowdery Conundrum: Oliver’s Aborted Attempt to Describe Joseph’s First Vision in 1834 and 1835,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 8 (2014): 27–44.

here.”<sup>75</sup> Notice that William Smith gives a logical reason for omitting information.

Ronald Barney spoke at the FAIR Conference in 2013 on Joseph Smith’s unfolding approaches to sharing his visions:<sup>76</sup>

So what I am asserting is that:

1. initially, Joseph had personal instincts that precluded him from publicly sharing his experiences
2. despite this instinct, in his youth he apparently shared the vision with people he thought would sympathize with his circumstances
3. being subject to rejection and disdain from these confidences he learned his lesson thereafter and protected his experiences
4. eventually he sensed the need of informing his intimates of what had happened to him
5. later his audience broadened to others outside his immediate circle
6. he made an early attempt to establish his story in writing in 1832 but the project stalled for reasons about which we can only speculate
7. finally, recognizing the necessity of publishing his story as a counter to his contemporary critics to advance the cause of the Church, he had prepared what we now know as the *History of the Church*.

In 2003, Mark Ashurst-McGee in *The FARMS Review* also discussed Smith and Cowdery’s motives for both reticence and publication:

Similarly, Smith and Cowdery may have begun providing the details of priesthood restoration in response to the bad publicity caused by the publication of Howe’s *Mormonism Unveiled*. It may be that Palmer [another critic] has made a historical contribution not in identifying the cause for

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75 See “William Smith on Mormonism,” quoted in Francis W. Kirkham, *A New Witness for Christ in America: Attempts to Prove the Book of Mormon Man-Made*, 2 vols. (Independence, MO: Zion’s Printing and Publishing, 1951), 2:414–417, quotes from pp. 415 and 417, respectively (capitalization altered).

76 Ronald Barney, “Joseph Smith’s Visions: His Style and His Record,” FairMormon Conference, 2013; online at <http://www.fairmormon.org/perspectives/fair-conferences/2013-fair-conference/2013-joseph-smiths-visions-his-style-and-his-record>

*inventing* the priesthood stories, but in identifying a reason for Smith and Cowdery making them public. They had initially kept them confidential in order to avoid persecution, but after the publication of *Mormonism Unveiled* they may have found that false reports “put in circulation by evil disposed and designing persons” were a form of persecution that outweighed the persecution they would receive from publicizing the details of priesthood restoration. The reason for keeping the story to themselves became the reason for sharing it.<sup>77</sup>

### Kinds of First Vision Evidence

Regarding the 1820 First Vision, Stephenson comments: “Unfortunately, no contemporary evidence has come to light to support this claim; and Joseph Smith himself did not document this supposed event until more than 12 years later.”

Notice the important qualification of “no contemporary evidence.” Contemporary evidence (that is Spring of 1820) is not the only kind of evidence. (What contemporary evidence do we have for the Big Bang or the Creation of Life or for Shakespeare’s authorship of his plays or for my Dad’s participation in the battle at Hill 609 in Tunisia or of my childhood success at playing Risk with my brothers in the basement of our home?) If the question is “Did Joseph Smith have a vision in 1820 that affected the course of his life?” rather than “What contemporary evidence is there that Joseph Smith had a vision in 1820?” the methods, problem fields, and standards of solution change radically. Stephenson might claim that “if Joseph Smith did have a vision, we would have abundant contemporary evidence,” but that claim itself is open to investigation. It is not a fact, but a premise that we can test only indirectly. Notice that Stephenson is perfectly willing to accept my oral report of an experience I had when I was 19 years old, a short time before my mission, of a vivid spiritual impression while reading Ether 12:39. What is his evidence that the event happened? Well, he listened to a FAIR Podcast that I recorded. It happens that the podcast happened over forty years after the event. I didn’t write the experience down at the time. I don’t remember telling anyone about it until much later. My parents were in a different part of the U.S. I don’t even remember who my Bishop was, and have no memory of

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77 Mark Ashurst-McGee, “A One-Sided View of Mormon Origins,” *FARMS Review* 15/2 (2003): 352.



telling any leaders. I don't even remember when I began to tell the story. I have written it up on occasion, posting on internet message boards, and relating it in testimony meetings and a podcast or two. Have I told the story differently at different times? Perhaps I have. I doubt if I can narrow the day of the experience down to more than July to September 15<sup>th</sup> 1973. Does Stephenson worry at all about this lack of contemporary external confirmation or supportive witnesses or imprecision in the exact day? Remember, he also says that I'm dishonest. Why then does he take my report of a forty-year-old personal experience at face value? He doesn't agree with the validity of my experience, but he bases a whole line of argument on the fact of such an experience. Obviously he accepts the existence of my personal account is a kind of evidence that he accepts as persuasive enough to use, even by itself. Among other things, my report makes sense within the LDS culture and if I did have an experience, it helps him explain important aspects of my behavior.

Here's another personal experience. When I lived in California (between 1983 and 1994) I read Raymond Moody's *The Light Beyond*, a study of Near Death Experience research and got excited. So I read several other books on the topic and started writing an essay that eventually got into the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2/1 in 1993. In the Sunnyvale Ward one Fast Sunday, I discussed some of my findings during testimony meeting. Afterwards, an investigator approached me and asked some questions. He then told me of an experience he had around 20 years before, several years before Raymond Moody's first book, *Life after Life* had appeared. That meant that at the time, neither he nor the surrounding culture had a framework in which to sympathetically explain what happened to him. He told me that when he was in the Air Force in Texas, his sergeant had him out running on a hot summer day when the red warning flag was up to ensure that no one was out running. As he came to the end of the run, his running partner looked at him, and asked, "Are you all right?" He fell flat on his face, and felt himself outside of his body, looking down as the sergeant ran over to revive him with an ammonia inhaler taken from the hatband of his "Smokey the Bear" style hat. Watching from above and behind, he reports that he thought this was the funniest thing he had ever seen. "I'm not even breathing," he thought to himself. "What good will an inhaler do?" He watched as he was loaded onto an ambulance, and then the scenery changed, and he found himself drifting over an open field like golden wheat. In the distance, he saw a bright light, and moved toward it. As he got closer, he saw a personage in the light, and thought, "Is that the Lord?" At that

moment he heard, “It’s not your time,” and he found himself back in his body. He immediately began to speak of it to the physicians, who told him he ought not to talk about such things if he preferred to be considered sane. His wife told him he had best keep quiet for the same reason. So more than twenty years came and went until the lobby of an LDS church turned out to be a hospitable environment where he could share and compare his story. After a silence of more than twenty years, he related it to me. Then the next week, he told the elder’s quorum. At the next Fast and Testimony meeting, he told the ward. I learned by personal experience that a person could have a profound experience and respond to personal rejection by being quiet about it in most circles for decades. He told me about it because he knew from my interest in NDE accounts that I would not reject his story out of hand. And when I heard it, I did so with enough background to be able to evaluate it for consistency with broad research and a wide range of similar accounts. While listening to his account, I was dealing with several kinds of evidence, none of which, I recognize, were contemporary with the original experience. None of the evidence is the same thing as proof. But that is not the same thing as no evidence at all.

While there is much about the First Vision account that is beyond the reach of history, much of it can be tested and has been tested in various ways. Matthew Brown’s book, *A Pillar of Light: The History and Message of the First Vision* is an excellent example. Don Bradley’s talk at the 2013 FAIR conference made a fresh contribution by considering whether the content of the vision reflected the concerns of Joseph’s home life in 1820, or the Kirtland concerns of 1835-38, when people like Fawn Brodie and Grant Palmer argue for the later social concerns as the source. Bradley observes:

If Latter-day Saint belief about the First Vision is correct, Joseph’s narrative reports a memory of his early experience. If, on the other hand, Vogel, Palmer, and other skeptical interpreters were to be correct, Joseph’s narrative was created to meet his needs as a church leader in the 1830s, bolstering his authority as prophet.

These two radically different understandings of the First Vision lead us to two radically different predictions about how well Joseph’s First Vision accounts will align with the events of the early 1820s. On the first, the believing, view, Joseph’s narrative should match the 1820s context in some detail. On

the second, skeptical, view, his narrative should match the claimed 1820s context poorly or only superficially.

Because these two views lead to such different predictions, we can determine which view is correct by testing those predictions. And this is what we'll do today.<sup>78</sup>

Bradley's conclusion is that:

As our examination shows, the First Vision fits its reported 1820s context hand in glove.

The argument that Joseph Smith crafted the First Vision narrative to address church problems of the 1830s thus fails ...

The original context that gave rise to Joseph Smith's First Vision was not the church he created but the family that created him. And the First Vision was not a product of his prophetic role, but the *source* of that role. Joseph Smith entered the Sacred Grove a boy and left it a prophet and seer.<sup>79</sup>

Stephenson worries about the silences from 1820 to 1832 and beyond, but some of the silences after that are telling. None of the people who lived through those silences regarding the First Vision with Joseph raised the kinds of complaints we hear from Stephenson. That too is evidence that must be accounted for in one way or another. And besides the D&C 20 reference that Stephenson wrestles with, and the *Reflector* article that he dances around, I must consider the presence of reminiscent accounts besides those provided directly by Joseph Smith or his close associates. For instance, in 2011 Tim Barker posted an essay on "The First Vision in the Formative Years of the Church" that includes a surprising number of such accounts, several of which, while written down later, point before the unpublished 1832 report.<sup>80</sup>

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78 Don Bradley, "The Original Context of the First Vision Narrative: 1820s or 1830s," FairMormon Conference, 2013, online at <http://www.fairmormon.org/perspectives/fair-conferences/2013-fair-conference/2013-the-original-context-of-the-first-vision-narrative-1820s-or-1830s>

79 Bradley, "Original Context of the First Vision Narrative."

80 See, Tim Barker, "The First Vision in the Formative Years of the Church" at LDS Studies: A Personal Study of Mormon Scripture, Doctrine, History, and Culture, 4 July 2011, online at <http://lds-studies.blogspot.com/2011/07/first-vision-in-formative-years-of.html>

The *Reflector* is evidence that someone quite early on, almost two years before the 1832 account was written, knew something about theophanies, angelic visitations, and divine commissions, and the need for authority. The silences that Stephenson discusses in the sources he quotes amount to his display of dissonance management relative to the *Reflector*. Silences elsewhere don't explain how such ideas got into the *Reflector*. He fails to even mention the existence of reminiscent accounts such as those reported by Tim Barker. They are evidence to appreciate, deprecate, or ignore, depending on the direction of one's cognitive efforts or dissonance management relative to that sort of evidence. Note too how my paradigm can account for all the evidence (including "negative" evidence, such as a lack of contemporary accusations that Joseph fabricated the First Vision later), while Runnells's cannot.

### Concerning Priesthood Restoration

In Runnells's original letter, he said, "Although the priesthood is now taught to have been restored in 1829, Joseph and Oliver made no such claim until 1834." Stephenson makes a number of arguments regarding the priesthood restoration accounts, eventually turning to David Whitmer's late reports on the topic. He targets this statement from my essay:

It should also be obvious that the Book of Mormon is very clear about the need for priesthood authority, and that provides important context for the other earlier priesthood restoration documents, as well as consistency with what became the official accounts. Runnells also overlooks the important essays in the 2005 volume, *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844*, which includes "Seventy Contemporaneous Priesthood Restoration Documents." Several of these accounts also predate Palmer's claim about an 1834 invention.<sup>81</sup>

Stephenson responds:

This doesn't address anything either. It simply diverts the reader to a book. Does Christensen think anyone will be impressed by the title without him providing any evidence? He doesn't even give any examples from the book. If this is such great evidence, why doesn't he mention any of it?

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81 Christensen, "Eye of the Beholder," 206.

I had thought that naming the book and giving the title of a relevant essay was a useful mention and far more substantial than waving a blank sheet of paper in the manner of Senator Joe McCarthy. The priesthood articles in the book include 48 pages of material, including both introductory historical analysis, and quotation of seventy primary sources. I admit that the notion of retyping all of it myself seemed daunting as well as redundant and unnecessary for my purposes. But, if Stephenson had looked at the book he would have noticed that number 6 on the list of primary sources is Joseph Smith (1832), which, it happens, I not only mentioned because it is great evidence but quoted. Number 32 on the list is the 1831 Palmyra *Reflector*, which I have quoted in this essay. And here is Number 20 on the list, from the December 7 1831 *Painesville Telegraph*.

About two weeks since some persons came along here with the book, one of whom pretends to have seen Angels, and assisted in translating the plates. He proclaims destruction upon the world within a few years, — holds forth that the ordinances of the gospel, have not been regularly administered since the days of the Apostles, the said Smith and himself commenced the work. ... The name of the person here, who pretends to have a divine commission, and to have seen and conversed with Angels is *Cowdray*.<sup>82</sup>

Why did I mention the Book of Mormon on authority? Because it was in reading passages on authority during the translation that Joseph and Oliver asked the questions that led to their experiences with angelic messengers.

Stephenson quotes from Alma 13:10–16 on the priesthood (an important source), and concludes:

Notice that it says “these ordinances were given after this manner, that thereby the people might look forward on the Son of God, it being a type of his order, or it being his order, and this that they might look forward to him for a remission of their sins.”

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82 *Painesville Telegraph*, December 7, 1830, reprinted in Brian Q. Cannon and BYU Studies Staff, “Documents of the Priesthood Restoration,” in *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844*, ed. John W. Welch with Erick B. Carlson (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press/SLC, UT: Deseret Book Company, 2005), 241.

This “order” was to be fulfilled in Christ, according to the Book of Mormon. That is why there was [sic] no priesthood ordinations when the Church was first organized ...

Again, Stephenson’s grasp of the textual data is lacking. Contrary to his claim, 3 Nephi 12:1 refers to 12 “who had been called, and received power and authority to baptize,” and providing this authority is almost one of the first things that the risen Christ does (3 Nephi 11:21–23). In 3 Nephi 18:5 Jesus says “Behold there shall be one ordained among you, and to him I will give power that he shall break bread and bless it and give it unto the people of my church.” Third Nephi 18:37 tells of how “the disciples bear record that he gave them power to give the Holy Ghost.” Immediately thereafter, the disciples baptize each other and the multitude (3 Nephi 19:11–13) and 3 Nephi 27:1 later describes “the disciples ... baptizing in the name of Jesus.” In 4 Nephi 1 we learn how “the disciples of Jesus had formed a church of Christ. ... And as many as did come unto them, and did truly repent of their sins, were baptized in the name of Jesus; and they did also receive the Holy Ghost.” Moroni later makes it clear that priesthood authority even in his day was passed on by ordination (Moroni 3). It is also clear that not all priesthood authorities had the right to conduct all ordinances — priests and teachers are ordained by elders, while only elders and priests administer the sacrament (Moroni 4:1). Stephenson’s ignorance of these basic themes in LDS scripture is great but perhaps not surprising.

Cannon’s essay on “Seventy Contemporary Priesthood Restoration Documents” cites “William E. McLellan’s journal entry for October 25, 1831” which “speaks of ‘the High-Priesthood’ and ‘the lesser Priest-Hood.’”<sup>83</sup> The same page also refers to McLellen in 1878 saying while he heard the stories of the angel and plates many times in 1831, he didn’t hear about the angelic priesthood ordinations until a “year” afterward, that being 1832.<sup>84</sup>

Stephenson neglects this and quotes from David Whitmer’s late interpretation as expressed in his 1887 “An Address to All Believers in Christ.”

High priests were only in the church before Christ; and to have this office in the “Church of Christ” is not according to

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83 Brian Q. Cannon and BYU Studies Staff, “Seventy Contemporaneous Priesthood Restoration Documents,” in *Opening the Heavens*, 227 n. 2.

84 Cannon et al., “Seventy Contemporaneous Priesthood Restoration Documents,” 227 n. 4.

the teachings of Christ in either of the sacred books: Christ himself is our great and last high priest. Brethren — I will tell you one thing which alone should settle this matter in your minds; it is this: you cannot find in the New Testament part of the Bible or Book of Mormon where one single high priest was ever in the Church of Christ.

The thing is, while Whitmer is quite sincere in his belief and remaining an important witness of several events, he happens to be wrong about high priests being in the church only before Christ. Margaret Barker observes that both John and James were high priests:

The Church preserved the world view of the temple, and two of the early leaders were described as high priests. James the brother of Jesus used to enter the holy place wearing linen garments and pray for the forgiveness of the people's sins, which is immediately recognizable as the role of the high priest on the Day of Atonement. James was also called, 'the Righteous One', as was Jesus (Acts 3.14), and this had been a title of the ancient high priests. 'Zadok' meant 'the righteous one'. This information about James was recorded in the early fourth century by Eusebius in his *History of the Church*, but he was quoting from Hegesippus 'who belonged to the first generation after the apostles'. Epiphanius, writing later in the fourth century, also used Hegesippus and said that James wore the *petalon*, the golden plate worn by the high priest on his forehead, inscribed with the Name. John also had been a high priest, according to Polycrates, bishop of Ephesus at the end of the second century. When he wrote to Victor, bishop of Rome, he said that John was buried in Ephesus and he too had worn the *petalon*. Thus Hegesippus and Polycrates writing in the second century, were describing the great church leaders of the previous century as high priests.<sup>85</sup>

Barker's work on the "Angel Priesthood" explores the role and symbolism of the high priests. And if we take knowledge of the roles and symbolism to our reading of the New Testament and the account in 3 Nephi, it becomes very clear that the functions and symbolism continues

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85 Margaret Barker, *King of the Jews: Temple Theology in John's Gospel* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2014) 16.

as an essential element and key to what occurs there. For instance, in *The Great High Priest*, Barker explains:

When he was anointed, the high priest was marked with the sign of the Name, described by the rabbis as a *chi* (*b. Hirayoth* 12a), but in the time of Ezekiel described as a *tau* (Ezek. 9.4) in each case, a diagonal cross. [Compare Jacob 4:14 on “the mark” and remember that Jacob is a consecrated temple priest contemporary with Ezekiel.]

This cross was to become the mark of Christian baptism, as can be seen from the references in the Book of Revelation, where the redeemed have the Name on their foreheads (Rev. 14.1), described elsewhere as the seal of the living God, which must be a reference to the ‘seal’ of the Name worn by the high priest (Rev. 7.3). All those thus marked become the priests, serving in the sanctuary with his Name on their foreheads, and seeing the Face (Rev. 22.4).<sup>86</sup>

Barker explains that “Jesus was depicted as the great high priest throughout his ministry, taking away sins and making the broken whole. He was living the great Day of Atonement, bringing the excluded back within the bond of the covenant. This duty extended to all the baptized; those who bore the name and had been renewed, had themselves to make others new.”<sup>87</sup> That is, the role of the Christians is to carry on the work of the high priests. How can we do that without the high priesthood? As 1 Peter 2:5 says, “Ye also, as living stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ.”

Stephenson, apparently unaware of this, relies on Whitmer’s account, which continues:

The office of an elder is spoken of in many many places, but not one word about a high priest being in the church. This alone should convince any one, and will convince any one who is without prejudice, that the office of high priests was established in the church almost two years after its beginning by men who had drifted into error. You must admit that the church which was to be established in this dispensation, must

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<sup>86</sup> Margaret Barker, *The Great High Priest: The Temple Roots of Christian Liturgy* (London: T&T Clark, 2003) 138–139.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.



be “like unto the church which was taught by Christ’s disciples of old.” Then the Church of Latter-Day Saints is unlike the Church of Christ of old, because you have the office of high priests in the church. The office of a high priest as you have it, is of more importance than the office of an elder; then why is not something said about this high office being in the Church which Christ came on earth to establish at Jerusalem and upon this land? Why is there not something said about this important office, and so much said about an elder?

Stephenson concludes that “Even David Whitmer understood that there were no high priests in the Church of Christ in the Book of Mormon. Those that are mentioned in Third Nephi are all wicked and not followers of Christ.”

The problem is that Whitmer’s understanding is incorrect, as is Stephenson’s. There is evidence relevant to the question that he did not consider (as Barker shows) and experiences relevant to the question, from church history that he did not personally witness, as the accounts from Smith and Cowdery show.

Regarding 3 Nephi, we recall that in ancient Israel, the high priest was the one who entered the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement and beheld the face of the Lord. John Welch has shown how much more clearly we can understand the significance of the 3 Nephi account when we read with a temple understanding.<sup>88</sup> And I personally don’t think that everything had to be done all at once.

In 3 Nephi 17:2–3, Jesus says, “I perceive that ye are weak, that ye cannot understand all my words.. go ye into your homes, and ponder upon the things which I have said, and ask of the Father in my name, that ye may understand, and prepare your minds for the morrow, and I come unto you again.” One thing I noticed in reading the New Testament and the Doctrine and Covenants while still on my mission was that neither the Apostles, nor Joseph Smith got everything in one big pile, presorted and labeled, on the first day. I learned that God engages in processes that take time to accomplish the results he has in mind (see especially Isaiah 55:8–11). If high priests were not established publicly in the church at first, I also notice that the Temple was not completed and dedicated until 1836. People and buildings and human minds all take time.

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88 John W. Welch, “Seeing Third Nephi as the Holy of Holies of the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 19/1 (2010): 36-55.

And there is evidence from Whitmer on the priesthood from earlier accounts that Stephenson did not report. Kenneth Godfrey has shown that “David Whitmer himself was not free from inconsistency when recounting his views on the priesthood. For example, David H. Cannon reported that in 1861 when he visited Whitmer, the two men with others stood beside the grave of Oliver Cowdery. Whitmer declared that he had heard Oliver say, ‘I know the Gospel to be true and upon this head has Peter, James and John laid their hands and conferred the Holy Melchizedek Priesthood.’ Whitmer also displayed for the group how this was done.”<sup>89</sup>

### On Disillusion and Enlightenment

Stephenson titles his essay “The Sky is Falling” because I referenced the fable of Chicken Little as a supplement to understanding the point of the Parable of the Sower. The fable illustrates a point of the Parable, that the same information can be interpreted in crucially different ways, depending on soil and nurture. Stephenson skips over the presence and importance of the Parable of the Sower, and illustrates his essay with a cartoon of a chicken, labeled, Mormon Apologists, having been bonked on the head by an acorn labeled truth. The illustration sets the tone, but is it a fair representation, a fitting metaphor?

Runnells reports his own response to learning unexpected things:

When I first discovered that Joseph Smith used a rock in a hat to translate the Book of Mormon, that he was married to 11 other men’s wives, and that the Book of Abraham has absolutely nothing to do with the papyri or facsimiles .. I went into a panic. I desperately needed answers and I needed them 3 hours ago. Among the first sources I looked to for answers were official Church sources such as Mormon.org and LDS.org. I couldn’t find them.

My own response when I encountered such questions and claims decades ago was generally been along the line of “Oh .. that’s interesting. I did not know that. I wonder where I can go to learn more?” I can’t help notice the frankly admitted presence of panic in Runnells’s own report

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89 Kenneth W. Godfrey, “David Whitmer and the Shaping of Latter-day Saint History,” in Stephen D. Ricks, Donald W. Parry, and Andrew H. Hedges, eds., *The Disciple as Witness: Essays on Latter-Day Saint History and Doctrine in Honor of Richard Lloyd Anderson* (Provo: Foundation of Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2000), 241-242.

and no memory of such panic anywhere in my own history. If you think about that circumstance, you might be able see what about the cartoon that I find truly amusing and ironic.

When I was home from my mission in 1975, and getting interested in questions, I couldn't go to LDS.org or FairMormon, because at that time they did not exist. But I made an effort to use the resources I had, and I gave things time. I never assumed that I was being lied to because I never assumed that the people teaching the lessons knew everything either. And I soon realized that I could not assume that the people writing the books I was reading knew everything. But there were bookstores and libraries and sources out there that I could explore. There were, I knew, differences in knowledge among the saints, and differences in quality in various books. The Tanners and Brodie took the role of the faith-boogies in those days, willing to lead me into the safety of their caves. But frankly, since I was never in a state of panic, I didn't bother to take their offer, though I eventually read their books under conditions of much better lighting. So, it was a matter of seeking "out of the best books words of wisdom" (D&C 88:118). Notice that the famous passage does not necessarily direct us to "approved books."

I nurtured my seeds and have seen what I consider to be amazing growth and fruitfulness. Answers came to me in a constant steady stream over time, some of which changed the way I saw everything else.

Stephenson says, "What Christensen seems unable to answer is why there are so many others like Jeremy with the same concerns and questions with Church history and doctrinal problems / inconsistencies."

The older I get the more powerfully impressed I am with just how ably the Parable of the Sower accounts for why there are so many people like Jeremy, with the same concerns and questions. What grows in panic that does not grow with open-ended, patient study? Indeed, Neal Rappleye represents a contemporary peer for Runnells who has successfully navigated the contemporary concerns. He titled an April 2015 blog post "Patient Faith and Expanding Knowledge: Some Reflections on My Journey with the Book of Mormon (and an Invitation)."<sup>90</sup>

Stephenson concludes by insisting that "Truth is not determined by the eye of the beholder. Rather, it is inviolable and incontrovertible." From my perspective, he sounds like he's in Position 2 of the Perry Scheme:

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90 See Neal Rappleye at <http://www.studioetquoquefide.com/2015/04/patient-faith-and-expanding-knowledge.html>

## POSITION 2 - Multiplicity Prelegitimate.

Now the person moves to accept that there is diversity, but they still think there are TRUE authorities who are right, that the others are confused by complexities or are just frauds. They think they are with the true authorities and are right while all others are wrong. They accept that their good authorities present problems so they can learn to reach right answers independently.<sup>91</sup>

According to LDS scripture, “truth is a knowledge of things as they are, as they were, and as they are to come.” How is knowledge of the things as they are, as they were, and as they are to come acquired, if not through the efforts of beholders? I agree that the truth is out there, but the issue that concerns me is how much of it gets in here? How can I get hold of it? Ontological truth does not change, except of course with respect to the ongoing processes over time, but our knowledge of the truth, including those processes, does and should change. Take, for example, Alfred North Whitehead:

When I was a young man in the University of Cambridge, I was taught science and mathematics by brilliant men and I did well in them; since the turn of the century I have lived to see every one of the basic assumptions of both set aside; not, indeed, discarded, but of use as qualifying clauses instead of as major propositions; and all this in one life-span — the most fundamental assumptions of supposedly exact sciences set aside. And yet, in the face of that, the discoverers of the new hypotheses in science are declaring, “Now at last, we have certitude.”<sup>92</sup>

The Tanners titled their most famous book, *The Changing World of Mormonism*, based on the entirely dubious foundational premise that any change is inherently scandalous. Notice what happens to the scandal if the subject is the Changing World of Science, or Astronomy, or Computing, or Politics, or History, or Education, or Music, or Botany,

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91 Email on the Perry Scheme of Cognitive and Ethical Growth, from Veda Hale, online at <http://dl.dropbox.com/u/22100469/Perry%20Scheme.pdf>

92 From Alfred North Whitehead, in Charles P. Curtis, Jr., and Ferris Greenslet, comps., *The Practical Cogitator, or the Thinker's Anthology* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1945), 112.

or Paleontology, or whatever. It turns out that in most fields of learning and areas of life, the fact of change is not at all scandalous. We expect it.

It would be nice if all church manuals and church art were better, but I have to ask, does God really want me to grow up sure in the knowledge that everything my teachers and formal leaders say is absolutely correct and unchanging and all I have to do is sit and listen to approved thoughts? If that is where I end up, have I really grown up?

And there is the issue of how we chose and signal out membership in the communities in which we participate. “Like the choice between competing political institutions, that between competing paradigms proves to be a choice between incompatible modes of community life.”<sup>93</sup>

One of the defining characteristics of the ex-Mormon community these days happens to be a shared exit narrative.<sup>94</sup> And telling the story a particular way is a way of explaining how a person happens to belong in the community they choose. There are scripts to learn, and roles to play. It happens that telling the story through a sense of disillusion and betrayal is a community-licensed way of interpreting an experience. But my point is that a different approach to the same discoveries can lead to a sense of enlightenment and faith. The narrative in which the information is placed decisively colors how it is experienced and what it means for defining the community in which one chooses to live.

### **The Man Behind the Curtain**

Stephenson includes a picture of Ray Bolger in his scarecrow makeup from the 1939 *Wizard of Oz*. His intent is to illustrate the straw man fallacy, which has to do with the debate tactic of knocking down a weakened, inauthentic representation of an opponent’s argument. Readers can and will — and for that matter, must — judge for themselves on this matter.

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93 Kuhn, *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 94.

94 See helpful discussions by Rosemary Avance, “Seeing the Light: Parallels in Mormon Conversion and De-Conversion Stories,” FAIR Conference, 2012 <http://www.fairmormon.org/perspectives/fair-conferences/2012-fair-conference/2012-seeing-the-light-parallels-in-mormon-conversion-and-de-conversions-stories>, Seth Payne, “Why Mormonism Matters: Pastoral Apologetics and the LDS Doubter,” FairMormon Conference, 2013 <http://www.fairmormon.org/perspectives/fair-conferences/2013-fair-conference/2013-why-mormonism-matters-pastoral-apologetics-and-the-lds-doubter> and Gregory L. Smith, “The Return of the Unread Review” (Interpreter Foundation, 2012) <http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/SMITH2-Return-of-the-Unread-Review.pdf>.

I also selected my title, drawing on another *Wizard of Oz* reference, taking my own deliberately ironic approach to the same theme. At a key moment in the film, while the terrifying head and smoke and light and booming voice has Dorothy and her friends all quaking and frustrated, Toto pulls aside the a curtain, and shows the man who has been creating the image. This image-making, it happens, is something that we all do. It's an inescapable aspect of the human condition. One thing that we ought to realize while we watch that scene is that behind the memorable image of the befuddled wizard, embarrassed and exposed for the flawed and imperfect human that he is, are the combined and overlapping efforts of Frank Morgan, the actor, Victor Fleming, the director, and L. Frank Baum, the original author, all striving with all of their art and skill to distract us from thinking about their contribution to the image creation. By showing us the image of Toto pulling aside one curtain, they distract us from thinking about the equally important curtains we define in our own minds.

And that is the point of my title. We ought to bring to our investigations the realization that we create images in our minds. Try this. Find a ruler or measuring tape, even better, just use your own hand. Stand in front of a mirror at normal shaving or teeth-brushing distance, and estimate the size of the image of your face in the reflection. After you estimate, use the ruler or extend your hand and use your fingers to measure the size of the actual image. Then draw your hand or measurement to place beside your own face. Then think about what is always going on behind the curtain of our own heads.

We create images of reality in our minds, based on partial knowledge, and subject to the perspectives we adopt. Knowing that, we first ought to work on the beams in our own eyes. Then shall we see clearly and not before.

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