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Playing to an Audience: A Review of Revelatory Events

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PLAYING TO AN AUDIENCE: A REVIEW OF *REVELATORY EVENTS*

Kevin Christensen

Review of Ann Taves, *Revelatory Events: Three Case Studies in the Emergence of New Spiritual Paths* Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2016, 366 pages with notes and index \$29.93 (paperback).

Abstract: Ann Taves's book offers a comparative look at the origins of three groups, among them Mormonism. While she does not address the issue of competing explanations by each group about their origins or how to best navigate among them in terms that are not self-referential, that crucial circumstance is modeled by Thomas Kuhn in The Structure of Scientific Revolutions. So I, too, have a pattern that applies to my arguments just as much it does to those offered by Professor Taves. Where her book attempts to solve the puzzle of Joseph Smith, my review offers a test of her rules for puzzle solving. This includes comparisons with the standard approach to document testing cited by Hugh Nibley, looking at key aspects of her argument and treatment of sources, and by considering Richard L. Anderson's crucially relevant study of imitation gospels compared to the Book of Mormon. My own response should be tested not just as secular or religious, but against standards that are dependent on neither secular nor religious grounds. That is, to be valid, my response should argue "Why us?" in comparison to her case, rather than just declare that what she offers is "Not us."

We can decide situationally whether to define key concepts such as religion, spirituality, theology, and ministry or sit back and track how others are defining them. Either stance has its strengths and liabilities. Each allows us to see some

things while obscuring others. The key is to figure out what we want to see under any given circumstances.¹

The current paradigm is going toward a non-faith-based study, which has no future. By this I do not mean simply that the study is not faith-based; it is based on non-faith, so criticism does not mean close study; it so often means destructive study. New paradigms emerge from those aware of the crisis, who recognize the situation is not likely to be remedied by the methods that caused it.²

Ann Taves's new book offers a comparative look at the origins of three different groups: Joseph Smith and Mormonism, Bill Wilson and Alcoholics Anonymous, and Helen Schucman and the people involved in producing *A Course in Miracles*. While the groups have important differences, what they have in common are claims to revelation, an initial group of believers coming to grips with those claims, and the production of both a founding narrative and a large spiritual book. She explains that this "book reconstructs the historical process whereby small groups coalesced around the sense of a guiding presence and accounts for this process in naturalistic rather than supernatural terms" (xi). She says, "My goal in doing so is not to debunk or explain away the group's claims but to learn about the interactive process, the mental mechanisms underlying the unusual experiences, and the interplay between individual differences and group processes" (xii).

She also says, "I hope that this book models a way of playing fair with deeply held beliefs, whether religious or not, without having to bracket one's own" (9). That is, she wants her approach to these three subjects to provide a paradigmatic model, a "standard example of scientific work" that models a set of assumptions, method, problem-field, and standard of solution that works everywhere.³ She provides a lengthy appendix for this specific purpose, as a model approach to religious studies.

1. Ann Taves, "Negotiating the Boundaries in Religious Studies" (lecture, Graduate Theological Union Convocation, Berkeley, CA, September 21, 2005), <http://www.religion.ucsb.edu/Faculty/taves/GTU-FinalLecture.pdf>.

2. Margaret Barker, "Being an Independent Scholar," *Providence, Divine Action and the Church* (blog), November 15, 2012, <http://christpantokrator.blogspot.com/search/label/Barker%3A%20%27Being%20an%20Independent%20Scholar%27>.

3. Ian Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms: A Comparative Study of Science and Religion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 8.

As discussed in the introduction, the book presupposes that scholars can both analyze and reconstruct phenomena as they seemed from the point of view of historical or ethnographic subjects, and also attempt to explain the processes that produced the phenomena in naturalistic terms.⁴

As Kuhn says, “[P]aradigms guide research through direct modeling as well as through abstracted rules. Normal science can proceed without rules only so long as the relevant scientific community accepts without question the particular problem-solutions already achieved.”⁵

I come to her book from a different audience than intended, a member of a different community. I’m not a secular reader but an LDS believer with a long-held fondness for what Joseph Smith called “proving contraries,” since that process, he affirms, is one way that “truth is made manifest,” where truth is defined as “knowledge of things as they are, as they were, and as they are to come.”⁶ I am deeply concerned about models and rules and their implications for perception and understanding. And I have become more and more interested in the effects of ideological frames, paradigmatic examples, underlying metaphors, controlling narratives, socially defining myths, parables, dubious tweets, and sound bites that become the source of the rules accepted and applied by different communities.

Rules should therefore become important, and the characteristic unconcern about them should vanish whenever paradigms or models are felt to be insecure. That is, moreover, exactly what does occur. The pre-paradigm period, in particular, is regularly marked by frequent and deep debates over legitimate methods, problems, and standards of solution, though these serve rather to define schools [that is, different communities] than to produce agreement.”⁷

Although her personal background is both Catholic and academic, her book is expressly directed to “[s]cientific explanations [that] presuppose a naturalistic worldview and adopt the most economical explanations,” (9) at least relative to the problem field permitted by and the standards of solution accepted by a secular readership. That is, she knows her secular audience and plays the game according to the rules,

4. Taves, Appendix, 297.

5. Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* 2nd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970), 47.

6. Joseph Smith to Daniel Rupp, 1842, and D&C 93:24.

7. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 47–48.

playing field, questions asked, answers desired, and the social protocols they accept. There is nothing wrong with this any more than there is anything wrong with a Primary lesson, Gospel Doctrine lesson, *Sunstone* presentation, *Interpreter* essay, Republican or Democratic convention speech, Fox News commentary, or a Politifact investigation directed to a particular audience. There is no need to debunk or explain away LDS claims to a secular audience that presupposes a naturalistic approach is sufficient and that Professor Taves can be relied upon to provide one that satisfies their requirements. But the existence of a specific audience with a given set of expectations *always has implications* no one should ignore because of its effects regarding what questions are asked and not asked and therefore what is seen and not seen and therefore not explained under the “circumstances” Professor Taves organizes.

In an interview with Spencer Fluhman, Professor Taves commented that:

In general and as holder of a chair in Catholic studies at a public university, I stress our ability to shift our voice to one that is appropriate relative to a given audience or constituency. I often find myself explaining the difference between teaching Catholic studies courses at a public university and at a Catholic university. In the former, the aim of the institution is not religious formation but formation in the liberal arts as well as the formation of educated citizens (or something like that). In private universities with a religious mission, the institution often aims to combine formation in the liberal arts with religious formation. Within any of these institutional contexts, we may want to teach students to distinguish different voices, for example, the voice of the historian who speaks in light of approaches and methods shared by historians and the voice of a religious (or nonreligious) person when speaking in light of beliefs shared with cobelievers.⁸

This is all good sense. I do not measure a good Primary lesson for seven-year-olds in the same way I measure a good approach to Joseph Smith in a class for mature adults or in a scholarly paper I submit for publication. That is akin to saying that while Melville’s *Moby Dick* may be a terrible limerick, haiku, children’s book, Primary talk, Sunday

8. Ann Taves, “Mormon Studies in the Academy: A Conversation between Ann Taves and Spencer Fluhman,” interview by Spencer Fluhman, *Mormon Studies Review* v1 (2014), <https://publications.mi.byu.edu/fullscreen/?pub=2402&index=2>.

sermon, film script, or inauguration speech, it remains a masterpiece of literature by the standards of literature. I again note that different questions arise, different standards apply, different observations enter, and different measurements come into play, even when we consider the same subjects. And that, I think, is a crucial issue in approaching such books as *Revelatory Events*, which build their case and make their arguments on secular presumptions. It turns out to be just as crucial for when I read books such as, say, *Illuminating the Sermon at the Temple and the Sermon on the Mount*, or *The Great Angel: A Study of Israel's Second God*, which do not build their cases and make their arguments on secular presumptions but which do offer new paradigms for viewing familiar texts.

She assures readers, “Explaining things scientifically neither explains them away nor destroys their value” (10). Then at the very end of her book, she assures readers that she has provided a secular explanation of “[t]he Lord of Mormonism, the Higher Power of AA, and the Voice of the Course as creations, they were — as I have been saying — motivated collective subjectivities that envisioned spiritual paths that can and do transform people towards these particular ends (salvation, sobriety, reality). These goals must, of course be evaluated. While people continue to disagree regarding their validity and value, the power of the paths to transform is — in my view — quite apparent” (295).

In this naturalistic context, her reference to a “power to transform” comes across like saying “placebos can at times help people in pain” — though not, of course, the people who know what is really going on, who know the placebo is not real medicine, that is, her intended secular audience, who have their own pre-existing and unquestioned group assessment of the true value of religion.

Taves refers to “Methodological Transparency,” which involves being “open and clear about the methods and presuppositions we are bringing to our analysis” (10). To her credit, Taves is open and clear in stating she adopts a secular approach to her subjects. That makes it easy for me to account for the differences with my approach. But what is not addressed in her account is how one should go about deciding which approach is better and not just “better” for the needs and expectations of a particular audience (when agreement with a given ideological position defines “better”) but a better explanation of the subject regardless of the audience.

What drew my attention to Taves’s book were comments by an LDS reader on an Internet board who reported that *Revelatory Events* gave her a way to explain away the claims of Joseph Smith and all other religious claims in purely secular terms and let her walk away from the

community, assured she was leaving behind nothing valid or of value or with worthwhile power to transform. As Archimedes famously observed, “Give me a lever and a place to stand, and I can move the world.” So the welcome attempts at politeness, courtesy, and fairness that Taves includes do not counter the reality that her secular book offers a way to explain away religious faith, a lever and a place to stand, for those who might be seeking such explanations.

Like the choice between competing political institutions, the choice between competing paradigms proves to be a choice between incompatible modes of community life. Because it has that character, the choice is not and cannot be determined by the evaluative procedures of normal science, for these depend on a particular paradigm, and that paradigm is at issue.⁹

My own response should not be tested not in terms of secular according to religious standards, but against standards dependent on neither secular nor religious grounds. That is, to be valid my response should argue “Why us?” in comparison to her case, rather than just declare that what she offers is “Not us.” And the same should apply in the opposite direction. Those who share her secular views can easily dismiss my approach as “Not us,” rather than engage my attempt to explain “Why us.” I long ago learned that anyone can dismiss what LDS believers such as myself offer as polemical and apologetic rather than valid scholarship, as if the existence of faith commitments cancel the possibility of a better case and as if a secular approach is inherently objective and beyond criticism.

Ian Barbour explains that “the possibility of assessing a religious paradigm must in practice be compared with the possibility of assessing alternative religious or naturalistic paradigms — regardless of what the possibility of assessment in science may be. The most one can expect of any set of beliefs is that it will make more sense of all of the available evidence than alternative beliefs. ... [S]elf-criticism of one’s own basic beliefs is only possible if there are criteria which are not totally paradigm dependent.”¹⁰

While she does not address the issue of competing explanations and how to best navigate among them, that crucial circumstance is modeled by Thomas Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. So I too have a pattern to follow, and — this is key — the pattern applies to my

9. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 94.

10. Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms: A Comparative Study of Science and Religion*, 145.

arguments just as much it does to those offered by Professor Taves. The values Kuhn reports as most useful in judging theories include puzzle definition and solution, accuracy of key predictions, comprehensiveness and coherence (breadth and depth as well as internal and external consistency), fruitfulness, simplicity and aesthetics, and future promise. And it is important that this approach is not derived from LDS culture and therefore is not self-referential in discussing our culture. Part of my task is to point out available evidence that Taves does not consider and to make sense of it in terms of criteria not paradigm-dependent.

Regarding “Methodological Fairness,” Taves comments:

Research becomes polemical when we apply methods and theories to others that we are unwilling to apply to our own beliefs and practices. It is good to test our methods and theories on ourselves to see what it is like to be studied in this way. (10)

It strikes me that the issue here is not that research becomes polemical in this case of an unwillingness to be tested by the methods and theories we point at others, but hypocritical. A polemical method and theory — for example, “political correctness,” which originally applied to Marxist thought — is just as polemical whether applied to oneself, the subject of one’s inquiries, or one’s critics. In recent politics, we have seen the spectacle of Republican senators defending a closed-door approach to legislation on healthcare that matches in several ways and in others far exceeds the behavior they bitterly complained about seven years previously during the year in which the Affordable Care Act was debated and enacted in Congress and the Senate. The hypocrisy in that case is palpable, as is the predominant role of ideology in controlling the arguments raised or dismissed. In the case of Taves’s book, the method and theory is secular. I do not imagine that self-examination in light of secular theory would cause her any personal discomfort, inspire charges of hypocrisy, or lead to any startling revelations with respect to the Book of Mormon. As Kuhn observes, “[T]he decision to employ a particular piece of apparatus and to use it in a particular way carries an assumption that only certain sorts of circumstances will arise.”¹¹

It is fair to ask whether and how her secular approach would serve to identify a real revelatory event within the historical records we have if she were looking at one. We can also ask whether her approach could allow her to identify and evaluate potential eyewitness details in the

11. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 59.

Book of Mormon. For example, the Book of Mormon is claimed not only to be the product of the religious experience of Joseph Smith, but the text itself purports to be set in an actual time and place:

For it came to pass in the commencement of the first year of the reign of Zedekiah, King of Judah, (my father having dwelt at Jerusalem in all his days); and in that same year there came many prophets prophesying unto the people that they must repent, or the great city Jerusalem must be destroyed. (1 Nephi 1:4)

In setting the Book of Mormon in real places in ancient times, Joseph Smith's large and complex book immediately does something the other two books do not. But Taves largely ignores the actual content and claims of the Book of Mormon. While it is true Joseph Smith, Bill Wilson, and Helen Schucman all produced large inspirational books, there are clear differences that don't emerge when the only mode of measurement and comparison amounts to describing the three very different books as "large" and "complex" with perhaps some poetry or distinctive language. She does not confront the scholarship and arguments by LDS scholars that make the opposing case. For a secular audience, she does not even have to raise the question because that audience presumes from the start that the authenticity of the text is not a serious question, deserving any in-depth inquiry. But again, I am not a part of her intended audience, and I therefore, come to her text with a different bibliography in my head and different questions on my lips. Nevertheless, for her and for her target audience, all of this kind of thing can be blanketed over, not by exploring the text of the Book of Mormon, but by an appeal to storytelling talent.

At the same time, insider accounts acknowledge factors that they do not stress, such as Smith's storytelling abilities and Schucman's lifelong attraction to Catholicism and her exposure to the American metaphysical traditions, including Christian Science. (243)

Her assertion that Joseph Smith created the Book of Mormon out of his imagination is not itself a test of her starting premise that he did so. She focuses on differences between early and late historical accounts, group dynamics, comparison of the translation accounts by Smith and Schucman, and research into dissociation and automaticity as behind other examples of "spirit writing," studies of highly hypnotizable people, and examples of artistic creativity, such as Enid Blyton, a noted and prolific author of children's books. When comparing a student in a

hypnosis experiment with Joseph Smith, she cites the famous quotation from Lucy Mack Smith's history regarding Joseph's early "recitals," and juxtaposes that with selected comments from neighbors to emphasize his ability as a storyteller.

Both the student and Smith recounted narratives of great vividness in two modes: the student in an ordinary and a hypnotized mode and Smith in an ordinary and a translating mode. Lucy Smith similarly attests to the vividness of Joseph's "recitals" in which he described the "ancient inhabitants of this continent" to his family after his initial discovery of the plates in 1823. According to Lucy (EMD 1: 295– 96), he described "their dress[,] their maner [sic] of traveling[,] the animals which they rode[,] The cities that were built by them[,] the structure of their later buildings[,] with every particular of their mode of warfare[,] their religious worship — as particularly as though he had spent his life with them[.]" Accounts of neighbors from the early thirties refer to his "marvellous stories" (EMD 2: 27, 60– 61) and later accounts describe his "fertile imagination" (EMD 3: 211) and ability to "utter the most palpable exaggeration or marvellous absurdity with the utmost apparent gravity" (EMD 3: 93). Writing in 1834, Eber Howe concluded that "a natural genius, strong inventive powers of mind, a deep study, and an unusually correct estimate of the human passions and feelings" more than made up for any deficiencies in Smith's formal education ([1834] 2015, 20; EMD 3: 303–4). (252)

There are some unexamined oddities about the Lucy Smith quote. Before I would take it as an interpretive foundation, I must consider that, even though a first-hand account, it is not an autograph account, and it is late,¹² dating to an 1844 dictation in Nauvoo to the non-LDS, 24-year-old

12. Lucy Mack Smith's *A History of Joseph Smith by His Mother* was dictated to a Nauvoo school teacher, Martha Jane Coray in 1845. Coray and her husband compiled the notes and other sources into a manuscript that was later published in 1853. Sharalynn D. Howcroft (an editor of Oxford University Press' forthcoming *Foundational Texts of Mormonism*) stated "For example, Lucy Mack Smith reportedly dictated her history to Martha Jane Coray; however, the extant manuscript doesn't show evidence of dictation and there are other clues in the manuscript that suggest what we have is a few generations removed from a dictated text. Additionally, scholars have presumed the fair copy was a contiguous history, but physical clues indicate it was two separate copies of the history that were combined. This kind

Martha Jane Coray regarding events in Palmyra 1823 and then not published until 1853. That is, the quote is six years older than Joseph Smith's official history from 1838, which Taves takes notable interest in dissecting and comparing with earlier sources. In her discussion of method and sources for Mormonism, she observes:

Apart from the 1825 agreement with Josiah Stowell and the 1826 court record, both of which are preserved in later versions, we have no real-time access to events until July 1828, when D&C 3 — the first real-time recorded revelation — opens a window in the wake of the loss of the first 116 pages of the manuscript. Chapter 1 thus opens with an in-depth analysis of D&C 3, read as a window on that moment rather than as it was interpreted and reinterpreted in later accounts. (21)

The Lucy Smith quote, aside from being a late account, rather than early and contemporary (not “real time access,” not a direct “window on the moment”), turns out to be notably odd and unique with respect to Joseph Smith, rather than well supported from a range of sources. Certainly much in Lucy's biography is well supported, but let us recognize the anomaly here. Odd accounts do occur in history, yes, but the account raises questions that should be faced and mentioned before building one's structure there. First of all, the Book of Mormon we have has no descriptions of people riding animals in over 500 pages that include several major migrations and 100 distinct wars. It provides no notably detailed descriptions of clothing (other than armor) and no detailed descriptions of the structure of later buildings. The most detail we get involves descriptions of fortifications with palisaded walls and ditches.

Then there is the unasked question as to why — if Joseph Smith as a youth was capable of this kind of detailed, immersive, evening-filling recital on the everyday particulars of Book of Mormon peoples and culture — do we have no further record anywhere of his performing the same service as an adult? Perhaps the closest circumstance on this topic involves the Zelph story on Zion's Camp, but in that case the notable differences in the details recorded by the different people who reported it, even those writing close to the event, should give pause to a person

of analysis and discovery extends our understanding beyond what the content of a historical source divulges.” See <https://bycommonconsent.com/2018/01/10/qa-with-foundational-texts-of-mormonism-editors/>.

trying to build an interpretive foundation on an isolated, late, anomalous account related to far longer and complex narrative than the Zelfh gossip.¹³ It bears mentioning that if Joseph Smith had been telling stories about the Book of Mormon peoples, animals, clothing, and culture, such stories should have had an obvious influence on Abner Cole's 1830 parody version, the *Book of Pukei*, which "tells in mocking fashion about the sorts of things that Joseph's neighbors expected to find in the Book of Mormon."¹⁴ Yet the most notable thing about the Book of Pukei is how utterly different it is from the actual Book of Mormon.¹⁵ The book Joseph Smith produced was emphatically not what his neighbors expected.

It is true the Book of Mormon does contain abundant details about "their religious worship" and their "modes of warfare," but we have no other accounts of Joseph Smith's filling anyone's evening or afternoon with amusing or serious recitals on those topics either. Again, why not? This is not a frivolous question but one addressed to a foundation stone upon which Taves chooses to build.

The one notable discussion of ancient buildings from Joseph Smith comes as his surprised and delighted review of John Lloyd Stephens's *Incidents of Travels Central America* as expressed in two articles in the *Times and Seasons* in Nauvoo.¹⁶ I find Michael Coe's report of Joseph Smith's encounter with the Stephens's book particularly telling:

In 1841 — after the Book of Mormon, actually — there was a publication in New York and London of a wonderful two-volume work called *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan* by John Lloyd Stephens, an American diplomat, and his artist-companion, the British topographical artist Frederick Catherwood, with wonderful illustrations by Catherwood of the Maya ruins. This was the beginning of Maya archaeology, ... and we who worked with

13. See Kenneth Godfrey, "What is the Significance of Zelfh in the Study of Book of Mormon Geography" in *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8/2 (1999): 7–19, 88, <https://publications.mi.byu.edu/fullscreen/?pub=1398&index=11>.

14. John Gee, "The Wrong Type of Book" in Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, John W. Welch, eds., *Echoes and Evidences of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2002), 310, <https://publications.mi.byu.edu/fullscreen/?pub=1082&index=10>.

15. *Ibid.*, 307–29.

16. See Matt Roper, Paul J. Fields, and Atul Nepal, "Joseph Smith, the Times and Seasons and Central American Ruins" *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 22/2 (2013), https://publications.mi.byu.edu/publications/jbms/22/2/7RoperFieldsNepal_JS%20Times%20and%20Seasons%20and%20CA%20Ruins.pdf.

the Maya civilization consider Stephens and Catherwood the kind of patron saints of the whole thing.

Well, Joseph Smith read these two volumes, and he was flabbergasted, because what he had dictated about the ancient his mind, these were the ancient cities that he was talking about. They weren't in South America, as he originally thought; they were in Central America and neighboring Mexico.¹⁷

It happens that there are over 500 passages with geographic details for the New World portions of the Book of Mormon, and they have a remarkable internal consistency.¹⁸ But they are not at all consistent with any location in South America, and more particularly, there is no way to fit the internal travel accounts required to a New York Cumorah and a Land South that includes South America. Coe doesn't bother to explain how Joseph managed to describe in detail and at length something so very different than he originally imagined, or more accurately, what Coe imagines Joseph imagined. Taves avoids these issues the same way Coe does: by not exploring the Book of Mormon text or Joseph Smith's history or believing Mormon scholarship in enough detail to encounter or generate such problems. In her account, the Book of Mormon is Biblical sounding, has a bit of distinctive language in chiasmus, and has a story of "shining stones" and divine rebuke she reads as analogous to Joseph Smith and the plates. But for purposes of her discussion, it can be defined simply as "large" and "complex," just as *The Big Book of AA* is, and as Schucman's *A Course in Miracles* is, and as a range of other automatic writings are. Personally, I find the superficiality of her approach to the Book of Mormon to be astonishing in a book that purports to authoritatively account for its existence. And this is true even considering the comment of another sympathetic Catholic scholar, Thomas O'Dea, who famously observed, "The Book of Mormon is not one of those books that one must read in order to have an opinion of it."¹⁹

It is not just the story of the Book of Mormon's publication but the experience of people in actually reading it that to this day defines and binds the community of Mormons. Grant Underwood's important

17. Michael Coe, interview, *American Experience: The Mormons*, Frontline, May 16, 2006, <http://www.pbs.org/mormons/interviews/coe.html>.

18. See John Sorenson, *Mormon's Map* (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2000) and John Clark, "A Key for Evaluating Nephite Geographies" *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon*, v1 (1989): 20–70.

19. Thomas F. O'Dea, *The Mormons* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 26.

surveys of early Mormon use of the Book of Mormon demonstrate that “[p]rophesies relating to the fate of the gentiles and the restoration of Israel were by far the principle interests of the early Saints.”²⁰ I notice that Lucy Smith did not mention those themes as part of her late dictated memory. Comparison of the set of common themes that emerge in Underwood’s survey, which includes Joseph Smith’s surprisingly rare comments on the Book of Mormon text and those published by Lucy Smith on Joseph Smith’s evening recitals, shows little overlap, if any. This circumstance ought to be mentioned as a puzzle, even if we have no way of definitively resolving it in light of current records.

Taves also avoids dealing with the contrast between the skeptical neighbors who wanted an appropriately dismissive explanation for the unwieldy book, the associated angel stories, and the growing religious community Joseph had somehow attracted and the family, who, according to William Smith’s account, viewed Joseph quite differently from the picture she paints from selected comments of neighbors (from many contradictory possibilities²¹) of Joseph as a storyteller. William reports that:

Knowing that he was very young, that he had not enjoyed the advantages of a common education; and knowing too, his whole character and disposition, they were convinced that he was totally incapable of arising before his aged parents, his brothers and sisters, and so solemnly giving utterance of anything but the truth.²²

William also noted that after Joseph’s vision became known, “We never knew we were bad folks, until Joseph told his vision. We were considered respectable till then, but at once people began to circulate falsehoods and stories in a wonderful way.”²³ Notice that the reports

20. Grant Underwood, “Book of Mormon Usage in Early LDS Theology,” in *Dialogue* 17/3 (Autumn 1984): 60, https://www.dialoguejournal.com/wp-content/uploads/sbi/articles/Dialogue_V17N03_37.pdf.

21. See Hugh Nibley, “Portrait of a Prophet” in *Collected Works of Hugh Nibley*, Vol. 11: *Tinkling Cymbals and Sounding Brass* (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1991), 175–88.

22. “William Smith on Mormonism,” quoted in Francis Kirkham, *A New Witness for Christ in America*, vol. 2 (Independence, MO: Zions Printing and Publishing Company, 1951), 416.

23. William Smith, quoted in Daniel Peterson and Donald Enders, “Can the 1834 Affidavits Attacking the Smith Family Be Trusted?” in John W. Welch and Melvin J. Thorne, eds., *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1999), 287. See also Donald L. Enders, “The

from neighbors that Taves selects to characterize Joseph Smith as a wildly imaginative storyteller all happen to be ideologically saturated, reflexively skeptical judgements, rather than cool, objective reporting, providing specific accounts and details of what Joseph Smith said and did on specific occasions.

Taves emphatically wants readers to picture Joseph Smith as creative and suitably educated through proximity to the King James Bible to produce such a work as the Book of Mormon, and she makes explicit comparisons with Schucman's preparation, as a PhD with a religious background, training as a philosopher, and experience as a Shakespeare scholar:

Both Joseph and Lucy Smith's accounts indicate that the angel had been telling Smith about the contents of the plates and that he had been recounting these stories to his family prior to recovering the plates. As Wapnick indicates, it is clear that Schucman was conveying ideas that would be central to the Course in the letters she wrote to Thetford in her own voice the summer before. (253)

This is to convey a period of preparation and incubation, to get around the problem of Joseph composing a large and complex document in just the two months of final dictation without recourse to anything like Schucman's decades of formal education and then taking a decade more to write down the course. But since Joseph Smith was immersed in the King James Bible, Taves writes as though there is nothing particularly difficult to explain.

Both Smith and Schucman were steeped in the genres of their respective texts. Smith was immersed in the King James Version of the Bible; Schucman was a philosophy major in college and loved Plato and Shakespeare. Schucman also knew the Bible very well, quoting from it "almost as readily as she could from Shakespeare." She was a psychologist trained in Freudian psychology, who did research on ego development, and an educator. (243)

After all, Bill Wilson and Helen Schucman also produced large and complex books, and she can compare some descriptions of Smith's translation process with accounts of how Schucman worked.

Joseph Smith, Sr., Family: Farmers of the Genesee," in *Joseph Smith: The Prophet, The Man*, ed. Susan Easton Black and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1993), 213–25, <https://rsc.byu.edu/archived/joseph-smith-prophet-man/16-joseph-smith-sr-family-farmers-genesee>.

In terms of their subjective experience, this suggests that we need to compare what it was like for Smith to experience the Lord “tell[ing] [him] in [his] mind & in [his] heart by the Holy Ghost” and Schucman hearing the voice of Jesus. (247)

Taves also cites Scott Dunn’s interesting essay on “Automaticity and the Dictation of the Book of Mormon.”²⁴ She adds further discussions of the experiences of highly hypnotizable individuals and examples of creativity, including those that bear comparison with examples of what has been called “spirit writing.”

To move a step closer to an explanation, I want to introduce a third person with unusual abilities, a college student described by psychologist Ernest Hilgard, who, with his wife Josephine established the Laboratory of Hypnosis Research at Stanford University and directed it for many years. The student in question showed up at their lab after having been hypnotized at a social gathering, during which time he recounted incidents from what he and others believed was a past life in Victorian England. He came to the laboratory, Hilgard writes, believing it was “a genuine reincarnation experience, but ... willing to have it subjected to criticism.” After interviewing the student, the Hilgards learned he had made “an intensive study of the British Royal family” many years earlier that he had subsequently forgotten. “Although the evidence is against the reincarnation interpretation,” Hilgard writes, “it is interesting in its own right because it shows that memories may be captured without identification (as in source amnesia) and woven into a realistic story that is believed under hypnosis by the inventor of the story.” (250–51)

Many years ago I acquired and read a very good book by Ian Wilson called *All in the Mind: Reincarnation, Hypnotic Regression, Stigmata, Multiple Personality, and Other Little-Understood Powers of the Mind*.²⁵ Wilson’s book mentions the work by Hilgard and others, so I had a preview of the ideas and research that Taves and would bring to her investigation

24. Scott Dunn, “Automaticity and the Dictation of the Book of Mormon” in Dan Vogel and Brent Metcalfe, eds., *American Apocrypha: Essays on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002).

25. Ian Wilson, *All in the Mind: Reincarnation, Hypnotic Regression, Stigmata, Multiple Personality, and Other Little-Understood Powers of the Mind* (New York: Doubleday, 1982).

of Joseph Smith. But one notable difference is that Wilson is far more interested in tracking down the sources of information that emerge in cases of purported hypnotic regression. Taves introduces the notion of highly hypnotizable individuals and makes comparisons with Scott Dunn's *Sunstone/American Apocrypha* essay on spirit writing. She makes a case that the Book of Mormon translation can be explained as one more case of spirit writing, based on the notion that self-hypnosis/dissociation provides a way to attain the altered state of consciousness required. She also suggests that the experiences of the witnesses can be explained via hypnosis theory, including spontaneous self-hypnosis.

H[ighly]H[y]pn[otizable]s are people who can most readily alter their perceptions in accord with the hypnotist's suggestions (that is, generate hypnosis-as-product). In the words of psychologist Auke Tellegen, they are people who have the ability to "represent suggested events and states imaginatively and enactively in such a manner that they are experienced as real." In the terms I have been using, the "procedure" is a small-scale social interaction and the "product" is a change in experience or behavior, such that the subjects (and oftentimes others) experience the suggested events as real. (254)

So this line of argument produces an explanation of Joseph Smith and the witnesses, a secular explanation by design, but is it the best explanation? "Best" requires comparison, and not just against something designed to make one's case look good in the absence of cross examination, but rather, something designed to stress the capacity of that explanation to the utmost. And how do we measure "best" in a way not ideologically determined? That is, that the argument is either secular or faithful should not carry the judgment of "best." Fortunately, Thomas Kuhn explains that "there are also, however, values to be used in judging whole theories: they must, first and foremost, permit puzzle-formulation and solution; where possible they should be simple, self-consistent, and plausible, compatible, that is, with other theories currently deployed."²⁶

To shift the metaphor somewhat, consider the problem that Edgar Allen Poe lays out in his famous detective story, *The Purloined Letter*. In such a situation, Taves could attempt to locate and identify the purloined letter by herself, as the detective does in the story, famously reasoning that the letter had not been hidden but placed in plain sight

26. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 185.

in such a manner that it would not be recognized for what it was.²⁷ But rather than locate the letter, her secular solution for the Book of Mormon is to assert that we can safely presume there is nothing to see, nothing to find, certainly not hidden because some official investigators are said to have looked carefully everywhere (except in plain sight in the right place), and therefore, the alleged letter is an imaginative fiction and that the proper subject of inquiry is how such a fiction came to be and what purposes it serves for the interested community.

For instance, regarding the plates, she says:

To get at this, I will assume for the sake of argument that there were no plates, or at least no ancient golden plates, and at the same time take seriously believers' claim that Smith was not a fraud. If we start with those premises, then we have to explain how the plates might have become real for Smith as well as his followers. The challenge, however, is not just to explain how they might have become real for Smith, but how they might have become real for *him in some non-delusory sense*. (51)

Her solution to the issue of Smith's dedication and sincerity, reached after navigating through stories of money-digging, spirits or angels, legal and personal trials, and encounters with both family and skeptics is this:

I am hypothesizing, involved creating what was in effect a representation of the plates, perhaps using sand and later tin or lead, as detractors claimed, in the knowledge that they

27. John Clark, incidentally, has said that Nephite and Lamanite artifacts are already in museums, not recognized for what they are. "The logical challenges with the first assertion, that no 'cities have been located,' are more subtle. Book of Mormon cities have been found, they are well known, and their artifacts grace the finest museums. They are merely masked by archaeological labels such as 'Maya,' 'Olmec,' and so on. The problem, then, is not that Book of Mormon artifacts have not been found, only that they have not been recognized for what they are. Again, if we stumbled onto Zarahemla, how would we know? The difficulty is not with evidence but with epistemology." (John Clark, "Archeology, Relics, and the Book of Mormon," in *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 14/2 (2005): 42, <https://publications.mi.byu.edu/fullscreen/?pub=1383&index=6>.) Many critics state that if the Book of Mormon were true, we would see a distinctly Ancient Near Eastern culture in Mesoamerica. Brant Gardner has argued that the small influx of immigrants would adopt the material culture they found among pre-existing population. (Brant Gardner, "The Social History of the Early Nephites," (presentation, FairMormon Conference, Provo, UT, 2001) <https://www.fairmormon.org/conference/august-2001/a-social-history-of-the-early-nephites>.) So the expectations are clearly different, which accounts for the very different tests and consequent perceptions.

would become the sacred reality the Smith family believed them to be only insofar as the angel made them so. (59)

She suggests that the experiences of the family and the witnesses can be explained by making an analogy to the Catholic view of transubstantiation. That is, fake or non-existent plates become a sacred record in the same way the wafer and the wine become, the actual flesh and blood of Christ in the Catholic Mass.

In comparing the gold plates and the Eucharistic wafer, I am not making an argument for the reality of ancient plates (or the real presence of Christ) but raising the possibility that when materializing the plates, Smith might have been thinking more like a good Catholic than a good Calvinist. The comparison, in other words, allows us to consider the possibility that Smith viewed something that he had made (metal plates) as a vehicle through which something sacred — the ancient golden plates — could be made (really) present. In both the Catholic and Mormon case, the sacred character is visible only to those who believe. (63)

In making the suggestion that such a mode of thinking was fundamental to the founding stories of the restoration, she does not consider why the LDS do not view the sacrament itself in these terms. Our bread and water are not literally the flesh and blood and Christ, but bread and wine (and now water) used as symbols.²⁸ We use water rather than wine because it can just as easily serve as a symbol as wine. The metaphors of identity are not a metaphysics of identity.

Lacking that much more direct analogy to support her thesis, she also cites the story of the shining stones from Ether as a possible precedent for the kind of thinking that could transform a fabricated set of plates into a sacred record (62–63). Such a reading of the Ether story (her only attempt at reading a story from the Book of Mormon) makes Joseph equivalent to the Brother of Jared and makes the shining stones equivalent to both a set of fabricated plates and transubstantiation in the Catholic view of the Eucharist. This strikes me as more an unlikely leap than plausible stretch, particularly since the LDS view of the Eucharist is plainly different. The illuminated stones were still stones, not divinity. The stories of the Brass Plates and Nephi's plates and the 24 plates of the Jaredite record do nothing to support her transformation by faith

28. See Moroni 4 and 5, D&C 27:2.

hypothesis.²⁹ Nor does the 1 Nephi 13:39–41 prophecy of other records to come after the publication of the Book of Mormon that will support the Bible and restore plain and precious things that had been lost.³⁰ Ancient literary precedents for the Jaredite stones provide believing LDS with other approaches to the Ether account not mentioned by Taves.³¹

Taves demonstrates far more interest in the LDS scholarship on the translation methods and accounts than on the content of the Book of Mormon. While she cites Brant Gardner, Stephen Ricks, and others on the translation, she seems most impressed by Scott Dunn's essay on automatic writing and the Book of Mormon, clearly because his approach closely resembles hers. Certainly, this kind of proposal is legitimate in the market place of ideas, but it also has implications for the direction her investigations take and avoid and the kind of explanations she proposes and ignores.

Science does not deal in all possible laboratory manipulations. Instead, it selects those relevant to the juxtaposition of a paradigm with the immediate experience that that paradigm has partially determined. As a result, scientists with different paradigms engage indifferent concrete laboratory manipulations.³²

In formulating the puzzle of Joseph Smith this way, around notions of automaticity and hypnosis and deliberately designing her investigation to satisfy a secular audience as consistent and plausible from that perspective, it's easy to see that Taves has grounds for believing she has succeeded in explaining him. Arthur Conan Doyle has Sherlock Holmes famously say, "When you have eliminated the impossible [in this case, real angels and plates], whatever remains, no matter how improbable, must be the truth."³³ As an archetype of the brilliant

29. See 1 Nephi 4:20, 5:10, 19:1–6, Mosiah 8:9.

30. See 1 Nephi 13:23–41. Compare these specific Book of Mormon passages to Margaret Barker, "Text and Context" (paper, 2002), <http://www.margaretbarker.com/Papers/TextAndContext.pdf>.

31. See John Tvedtnes, "Ancient Literary Texts in Support of the Book of Mormon," in Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, John W. Welch, eds., *Echoes and Evidences of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2002), 246–47.

32. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 126.

33. Arthur Conan Doyle, *Sign of the Four* (1890): 111, quoted in "Sherlock Holmes," Wikiquote, last edited 5 August 2017, https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Sherlock_Holmes#The_Sign_of_the_Four_.281890.29.

investigator, assembling the clues with perfect logic, Holmes's attitude in fiction reflected the logical positivism of the 20th century. However, Dorothy Sayers observed the effects of this dominant image of "the infallible sleuth with his cut-and-dried clues — and cast iron deductions ... and always right" and notes the shock and awe generated among both readers and writers when E. C. Bentley produced *Trent's Last Case*, in which, she reports, "The marvelous deductions might, he thought, quite easily go wrong — and in the book they go completely wrong from start to finish."³⁴ Investigators should always consider that making mistakes "in eliminating the impossible" is always possible.

Kuhn observes that:

Insofar as he is engaged in normal science, the research worker is a solver of puzzles, not a tester of paradigms. ... [H]e is like the chess player who, with a problem stated and the board physically or mentally before him, tries out various alternate moves in search for a solution. These trial attempts, whether by the chess player or the scientist, are trials only of themselves, not of the rules of the game.³⁵

What Taves produces is a hypothesis, a set of trial descriptions, but the book does not engage in a rigorous test of the validity of the rules she applies. She largely ignores both the content of the Book of Mormon and the scholarship produced by believers. Taves contextualizes her examples of Smith, Wilson, and Schucman with research on automaticity and dissociation and formally attempts to solve the puzzle they represent in strictly secular terms in that framework.

Toward the end of the emergence process, each group coalesced around an overall understanding of what had happened, which they captured in more or less official narratives of their group's emergence. These quasi-official origin accounts not only defined what it meant to be a member of the group, but also *constituted the group as a social formation*. (14)

It should not go without saying that her secular audience functions as a group that also "coalesced around an overall understanding of what happened" with respect to religious belief in general. For a target audience that shares her assumptions regarding the "rules of the game" as necessarily secular and naturalistic, this will do. This is what they paid

34. Dorothy L. Sayers, introduction to *Trent's Last Case*, by E. C. Bentley (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), x–xi.

35. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 144–45.

good money for when they purchased the book. A different audience may have different assumptions, different background information on Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon, and different questions. For instance, one of the things I think is important regarding the possibility of real plates are the two Mesoamerican cylinder seals, dating to Book of Mormon times, that have symbols on them that correspond to the characters Joseph Smith copied from the plates.³⁶ So for me, a question not addressed by the explanation Taves offers is, “How do I explain that circumstance without authentic plates?” Is coincidence good enough? I also think about the First Temple Judaism and the Book of Mormon, a notable field of exploration that post-dates the 2002 *By the Hand of Mormon* by Terryl Givens, Taves’s only serious bibliographic source on Mormon scholarship, and about Nibley on qasida and the Astons on Lehi’s journey, and Sorenson, and Gardner and Larry Poulson and John Clark on the New World setting, and much more. But the kinds of questions and information that occur to those familiar with a range of the best Mormon scholarship simply do not come up with her method, problem field, and standard of solution. Here is how Taves defines the problem of the Book of Mormon:

Based on this reconstruction, a naturalistic account would need to explain (1) the rapid flow of words that were “known” but seemed like they were not their own; (2) their ability to control the process, specifically to stop and start and shift modalities; and (3) their execution of a complex overall plan without evident planning. (250)

Compare this description of what, in 1953, Hugh Nibley observed about the puzzle regarding the best way to investigate the claims of purportedly historical texts. The traditional non-LDS approach involves a very different set of rules than what Taves offers:

One of the best-established disciplines in the world is the critical examination of written texts to detect what in them is spurious and what is genuine. ... [T]he rules given by Blass are all obvious enough on experience and reflection, but every one of them is a stumbling block to the superficial critic, and

36. See Carl Hugh Jones, “The ‘Anthon Transcript’ and Two Mesoamerican Cylinder Seals,” *Newsletter and the Proceedings of the Society for Early Historic Archeology*, no. 122 (Sept 1970), http://www.shields-research.org/General/SEHA/SEHA_Newsletter_122-2.PDF.

they have all been scrupulously avoided by those attacking the Book of Mormon.

To begin with, says Blass, “We have the document, and the name of its author; we must begin our examination by assuming the author indicated really wrote it.” You always begin by assuming the text is genuine. What critic of the Book of Mormon has ever done that?

...Thus while we can never prove absolutely that the Book is what it claims to be, we are justified at the outset in assuming that is it what it claims to be. If one assumes that it is true, its features at least become testable.³⁷

Taves’s definition of what a naturalistic account needs to explain is notably different from what Blass described as the definitive test for purportedly ancient documents. This potential test of the Book of Mormon involves details only an eyewitness could have seen, details difficult to fake, particularly at length in a long historical document, and emphasizing comparisons with information unknown to anyone in Joseph Smith’s time. We have in the Book of Mormon, beginning at a specific time and place, a journey across a desert, an ocean voyage, and then long accounts of life in the New World. We can hypothesize that any such details or claims got there through imagination or careful research by Joseph that none of his family or neighbors managed to detect, even when living with him daily or in rummaging through his house and belongings (after which the frustrated searchers never said, “No gold or plates, just shelves of books, maps, and reams of notes”). For Taves’s audience, it is enough to rely on Joseph’s conscious or unconscious memory, his storytelling abilities and mental states. It is important to remember that early critics of the Book of Mormon included Alexander Campbell, a second generation religious leader who was deeply involved in an attempt to restore primitive Christianity via Enlightenment methods, Abner Cole, a local newspaper editor, and John Gilbert, the typesetter, punctuator, and printer, all of whom had superior education and access to books than had Joseph Smith. That is, if anyone outside the Smith family was positioned to authoritatively comment on Joseph Smith’s environmental sources, it was they. (And it happens that we do have copies of every book listed in the Manchester lending library, though the Smiths were not members, did not

37. Hugh Nibley, “New Approaches to Book of Mormon Study” in CWHN 8, *The Prophetic Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Study, 1989), 55–56.

live in Manchester, and the bulk of the translation was done in far away Harmony, which had neither library nor bookstore.) But even Campbell, Cole, and Gilbert could not test Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon against sources and even sciences like plate tectonics that no one at the time could have known.

So environmental theories are themselves things with the potential to be tested rather than accepted uncritically. In testing rival theories, the issue remains, “Which paradigm is better?” and “Which problems are more significant to have solved?”³⁸ The question of the potential presence of eyewitness details in the text represents an obvious puzzle for Book of Mormon readers to consider even if Taves and her target audience disregard it. Remember that Kuhn explained that some of the most important questions for paradigm testing are these:

[T]hey must, first and foremost, permit puzzle formulation and solution; where possible, they should be simple, self-consistent, and plausible, compatible, that is, with other theories currently deployed.³⁹

The most important and reliable scientific approach to testing the authenticity of purportedly ancient texts is based on the experience and efforts of Renaissance scholars. That is, the test is not self-referential in design, requiring us to judge either Mormonism or secularism by the standards of Mormonism. Nor does the test require us to end with either a naturalistic explanation or a faithful one. We have a method that could, in theory, support or undermine the claims of either audience. In 1953 Nibley offered Blass’s methods as a model approach to the Book of Mormon. Many believing Book of Mormon scholars since Nibley have adopted it and have found it to be impressively fruitful. Only one book in Taves’s bibliography discusses this sort of thing in significant detail: *By the Hand of Mormon* by Terryl Givens. And the only bit of evidence that Taves mentions from his survey is “chiasmus” (241), listing the word once without defining it.

Neither the *Big Book of AA* nor *A Course in Miracles* claims to be an ancient text. By comparing the Book of Mormon only with surface features of the translation and the most general features that the three books have in common (“large” and “complex”), she avoids the need to even mention the possibilities for testing the content. (She does not even mention as a point of comparison with Bill Wilson that the

38. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 110 and 147.

39. *Ibid.*, 185.

Book of Mormon contains the Twelve Steps of addiction recovery.⁴⁰) She offers a paradigm as one to compete in the open marketplace of ideas. But as Kuhn explains, one of the most important criteria for valuing a paradigm is “puzzle definition and solution” and those offering “different paradigms engage in different concrete laboratory manipulations.”

For an example of how scholars with overlapping backgrounds can engage in different approaches to the same material, consider an essay that Taves does not cite from *American Apocrypha*, a 2002 book she does cite for essays by Vogel, Dunn, and Stoker. In his essay in the volume, Robert Price refers to the reforms of Josiah and the Deuteronomists in “discovering” the Book of Law in the sixth century BCE as an example of pious fraud, a paradigm for viewing Joseph Smith as doing something similar with the Book of Mormon.⁴¹ Just a few years later, in 2005, Margaret Barker spoke on the Book of Mormon at a conference in Washington, DC, introducing her approach like this:

I am not a scholar of Mormon texts and traditions. I am a biblical scholar specializing in the Old Testament, and until some Mormon scholars made contact with me a few years ago, I would never have considered using Mormon texts and traditions as part of my work. Since that initial contact I have had many good and fruitful exchanges and have begun to look at these texts very closely. I am still, however, very much an amateur in this area. What I offer can only be the reactions of an Old Testament scholar: are the revelations to Joseph Smith consistent with the situation in Jerusalem in about 600 BCE? Do the revelations to Joseph Smith fit in that context, the reign of King Zedekiah, who is mentioned at the beginning of the First Book of Nephi, which begins in the “first year of the reign of Zedekiah” (1 Nephi 1:4)? Zedekiah was installed as king in Jerusalem in 597 BCE.⁴²

40. See Colleen Harrison, *He Did Deliver Me from Bondage* (Hyrum, UT: Hearhaven Publishing, 2012).

41. Robert Price, “Joseph Smith: Inspired Author of the Book of Mormon” in Dan Vogel and Brent Metcalfe, eds., *American Apocrypha: Essays on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 321–66.

42. Margaret Barker “Joseph Smith and Pre-exilic Israelite Religion” in *BYU Studies Quarterly*, 44/4 (2005), 69. <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=3731&context=byusq>.

Even though Price and Barker are both non-LDS Bible scholars approaching the Book of Mormon, and even though both cite the reforms of Josiah and the appearance of the Book of Law, they engage in very different “concrete laboratory manipulations” and consequently perceive very different things.⁴³ For Price, the “discovery” Book of the Law serves as paradigmatic model of pious fraud; for Barker, it is part of a relevant historical context that constitutes a valid test. Remember that I quoted Nibley on Blass’s rules for authenticating historical documents:

To begin with, says Blass, “We have the document, and the same of its author; we must begin our examination by assuming that the author indicated really wrote it” You always begin by assuming the text is genuine. What critic of the Book of Mormon has ever done that?⁴⁴

What was remarkable about Barker’s approach is that it actually allows that assumption to inform her test. And that is the point Nibley made: “If one assumes that it is true, its features at least become testable.” Price began, as Professor Midgley observes of some LDS scholars, “to approach the text of the Book of Mormon already knowing, from sources exterior to the text, both the questions and the answers.”⁴⁵ Barker brought what she knew, from sources exterior to the text, a rather different set of questions for the Book of Mormon. Under the circumstance Barker defines, “its features became testable” to the degree the answers she gave were not ideologically predetermined. She does not begin by declaring the Book of Mormon is either fraudulent or correct but rather frames her approach in a manner in which both positive and negative answers to that question are at least possible, depending on how the testing goes. All of the themes of authority, transfiguration, and ascent that Price mentions in his discussion of 3 Nephi as evidence of a “cut and paste” approach by Joseph Smith also come forward quite naturally in comparing the Book of Mormon to Barker’s work on the Jerusalem 600 BCE context and the First Temple tradition. That is, the very issues that Price sees as evidence of Joseph Smith’s pious fraud turn out to belong together in the 3 Nephi temple setting in which they appear. It also happens that Price reviewed Barker’s *The Great Angel* as marking a “paradigm” shift

43. I treat this in detail in a forthcoming essay, “Notice and Value.”

44. Nibley, *The Prophetic Book of Mormon*, 55.

45. Louis Midgley, “Prophetic Messages or Dogmatic Theology? Commenting on the Book of Mormon: A Review Essay” in *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon*, 1 (1989): 107.

in Biblical studies and published her essay on “The Secret Tradition,”⁴⁶ which contained much relevant to the themes he considered in 3 Nephi. In his case, he has the relevant information at hand, but guided by his paradigm of pious fraud, he fails to imagine the possible connection.

I mentioned that Thomas O’Dea famously observed that the Book of Mormon is not “one of those books that one must read in order to have an opinion of it.” The same thing often applies to serious Book of Mormon scholarship. Sometimes, from some critics who read it comprehensively, we get telling admissions like that from John Charles Duffy, the author of an ambitious *Sunstone* essay on Book of Mormon scholarship. He reports of himself, “As someone who does not believe in the historicity of the Book of Mormon, I dismiss *a priori* much of the work FARMS scholars have done around the book.”⁴⁷

As Barbour observes,

[I]f a deduction is not confirmed experimentally, one cannot be sure which one, from among the many assumptions on which the deduction was based, was in error. A network of theories and observations is always tested together. Any particular hypothesis can be maintained by rejecting or adjusting other auxiliary hypotheses.

... In practice the scientist works in the framework of accepted assumptions and throws all the doubt on one hypothesis at a time; but it might be the accepted assumptions that should be questioned.⁴⁸

Here is what Professor Taves does with Joseph Smith, Bill Wilson, and Helen Schucman. For each of her three subjects, she first walks through the formal history written by the leaders of each group. Then she looks again at history, noting differences between the later formal histories and earlier contemporary accounts. This establishes the formal history as socially constructed to some degree to serve later purposes not originally envisioned. And it establishes Taves herself as one who knows what really happened and, therefore, somewhat above the historical record that binds believers.

46. Margaret Barker, “Secret Tradition” (paper, 1993), <http://www.margaretbarker.com/Papers/SecretTradition.pdf>

47. John-Charles Duffy, “Defending the Kingdom, Rethinking the Faith: How Apologetics is Reshaping Mormon Orthodoxy,” *Sunstone* 132 (May 2004): 43.

48. Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms: A Comparative Study of Science and Religion*, 99.

The discussion of each group opens with a consideration of how the story of the path's emergence is usually told by followers of the path, briefly introduces the key collaborators, and then indicates, based on the available sources, how we can reconstruct the process as it unfolded from the point of view of the interacting subjects. It's important to recognize that while the reconstructed process will break with the more or less "official" story of the path's emergence, it still tells the story from the point of view of the interacting subjects. The difference lies in the timing and the vantage point of the telling. Insiders tell the "official" stories in light of what emerged. Their retrospective accounts make the outcome look much more inevitable than it did as the process was unfolding. (6)

One thing she does not do is compare the process of emergence in her historical accounts with what happens in all histories, including the history of science. In a fascinating chapter called "The Invisibility of Revolutions," Kuhn observes:

As the source of authority, I have in mind principally text books of science together with both popularizations and the philosophical works modeled on them. ... They address themselves to an already articulated body of problems, data, and theory, most often to the particular set of paradigms to which the scientific community is committed at the time they are written. ... To fulfill their function they need not provide authentic information about the way in which those based were first recognized and then embraced by the profession. In the case of textbooks, at least, there are even good reasons why, in these matters, they should be systematically misleading...

For the moment, let us simply take it for granted that, to an extent unprecedented in other fields, both the layman's and the practitioner's knowledge of science is based on textbooks and a few other types of literature derived from them. Textbooks, however, being pedagogic vehicles for the perpetuation of normal science, have to be rewritten in whole or in part whenever the language, problem-structure, or standards of normal science change. In short, they have to be rewritten in the aftermath of each scientific revolution, and, once rewritten, they inevitably disguise not only the role

but the very existence of the revolutions that preceded them. Unless he has personally experienced a revolution in his own lifetime, the historical sense either of the working scientist or the lay reader of textbook literature extends only to the outcome of the most recent revolutions in the field.

...For reasons that are both obvious and highly functional, science textbooks (and too many of the older histories of science) refer only to that part of the work of past scientists that can easily be viewed as contributions to the statement and solution of the texts' paradigm problems. Partly by selection and partly by distortion, the scientists of earlier ages are implicitly represented as having worked upon the same set of fixed problems and in accordance with the same set of fixed canons that the most recent revolution in scientific theory and method has made seem scientific. No wonder that textbooks and the historical tradition they imply have to be rewritten after each scientific revolution. And no wonder that, as they are rewritten, science once again comes to seem as largely cumulative.⁴⁹

It seems to me that much of the angst in parts of the LDS community over our changing history can and should be seen not as a reasonable response to a genuine faith crisis but rather a panic response to what we ought to see as a normal human process. The standards of doing history changed, not just within the LDS community, but within the history profession as a whole, and naturally, the histories change accordingly. So we have things like the Joseph Smith Papers project, gathering and making available original, contemporary, first-hand accounts.

I've learned it is crucial to be aware of the implications of one's one paradigm in approaching debates with others: "When paradigms enter, as they must, into a debate about paradigm choice, their role is necessarily circular. Each group uses its own paradigm to argue in that paradigm's defense."⁵⁰

We define our paradigms via the standard examples we offer; the stories we take as representative of the general circumstances. Not only is Nibley's work paradigmatic for many LDS scholars, but it also represents, via his non-LDS authority Blass, a generally paradigmatic approach for the questions in authenticating historical documents. Taves offers her own secular approach as a general model to approach claims to revelation as signified by "large and complex" books. This is important. My approach to

49. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 136–38.

50. *Ibid.*, 94.

Taves here, in noting the difference between Taves's secular assumptions and Nibley's reference to Blass raises the questions of which paradigm is better and whether we establish "better" through methods of examination and judgement not themselves paradigm dependent, not based on self-referential standards. That is, I ought to be able to consciously explain "Why us?" in a way not just overtly or covertly saying "Not us." My methods ought to put my own paradigm at risk rather than protect it from such. My methods should in principle provide the means to make a case against my own starting beliefs rather than reflexively and uncritically dismissing any opposition as "fake news!"

Whose picture is truly representative? Which is better? "Like the choice between competing political institutions, that between competing paradigms proves to be a choice between incompatible modes of community life."⁵¹

What would make Taves's approach better than mine or mine better than hers? Is it just a matter of which audience we want to please or which community we want to join? Her bibliography cites only a few texts relevant to the question of defining and comprehensively solving the puzzle that the Book of Mormon presents.

- Fawn Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith*, 2nd ed. (New York: Knopf, 1971), a famously secular approach that has a section making an environmental explanation of the Book of Mormon.
- Richard Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984) which provides a brief summary of the Book of Mormon, a good survey of early critical arguments, and does respond well to the mid-80s fashion for invoking Ethan Smith's *View of the Hebrews* as potential source. (*View*, he observes, is about the Lost 10 Tribes, and in the Book of Mormon, the Lost 10 Tribes are expressly lost, and not the subject.) She also cites Bushman's *Rough Stone Rolling*.
- Scott Dunn, "Automaticity and the Dictation of the Book of Mormon" in Dan Vogel and Brent Metcalfe, eds., *American Apocrypha: Essays on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002). This is a slightly edited version of a 1985 *Sunstone* essay, basically changing the title and adding a wholly inaccurate and inadequate

51. *Ibid.*, 94.

response buried in a single footnote to Richard L. Anderson's important essay on "Imitation Gospels and Christ's Book of Mormon Ministry."⁵² Dunn's note 85 lists such things as Dan Vogel's *Indian Origins and the Book of Mormon*, George D. Smith's and Madison Sowell's 1981 essays on the Roberts study and *View of the Hebrews*, and a few other essays arguing against the Book of Mormon, but he doesn't bother to mention or address any important LDS scholarship since then. His footnote 86 refers to Madison Sowell's 1981 *Sunstone* paper as providing a "good overview of the debates" regarding "View of the Hebrews," but this inevitably and irresponsibly neglects the important work published in the two decades subsequent to Sowell's short essay and available before the publication of *American Apocrypha*. This includes John Welch's 1985 paper, "Answering B. H. Roberts Questions and 'An Unparallel,'" as well as Sorenson's *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon*. Apparently, neither Dunn nor his editors considered these studies relevant enough to mention. We can take Taves's book as an elaboration of Dunn's hypothesis.

- Terryl Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture that Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). In two chapters on "The Book of Mormon as Ancient History," Givens provides a serious historical survey of believing and skeptical arguments regarding the Book of Mormon as history from 1829 to 2002. Of the material Givens surveys, only chiasmus rates a mention in her book. Givens discusses critics such as Howe, Brodie, and even Dan Vogel, Mark Thomas, and John Brooke. He also mentions defenders of the Book of Mormon including important work by Nibley, Sorenson, Hamblin, Welch, Ostler, and Peterson.

52. Richard Lloyd Anderson, "Imitation Gospels and Christ's Book of Mormon Ministry," in *Apocryphal Writings and the Latter-day Saints*, ed. C. Wilfred Griggs (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1986), 53–107, <https://rsc.byu.edu/archived/apocryphal-writings-and-latter-day-saints/4-imitation-gospels-and-christ-s-book-mormon>.

- Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (New York: Oxford, 2010). This is a valuable and important close reading of the Book of Mormon focused on “character studies ... particularly the three major narrators”⁵³ while “bracketing ... questions of historicity”⁵⁴ in order to “demonstrate a mode of literary analysis by which all readers, regardless of their prior religious commitments or the lack thereof, can discuss the book in useful and accurate ways.”⁵⁵ While I appreciate Hardy's work, I have learned that contextualization can often make surprising differences in what a person might suppose is the “plain meaning of the text,” and that we cannot know the difference an ancient context makes unless we try it out.⁵⁶
- Eber D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2015), which contains the oft-quoted affidavits regarding the supposedly lazy and primarily money-digging and superstitious Smiths and the first iteration of the Spaulding theory. Because Taves sees Smith as the author, she does not discuss the Spaulding theory.
- Grant Palmer, *An Insider's View of Mormon Origins* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), which views Joseph Smith as fraud, deriving the Book of Mormon from

53. Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (New York: Oxford, 2010), 23.

54. *Ibid.*, xvi.

55. *Ibid.*, xvii.

56. For instance, consider the word “mark” in Jacob 4:14. BYU Professor Paul Y. Hoskisson wrote a detailed essay called “Looking Beyond the Mark” in Kent P. Jackson and Andrew C. Skinner, eds., *A Witness for the Restoration: Essays in Honor of Robert J. Matthews* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 2007), 149–64. He argues for a reading based on the definition used in the 1828 Webster's Dictionary: a target. In “The Deuteronomist De-christianizing of the Old Testament” in *The FARMS Review* 16/2 (2004), I argued that the “mark” is the anointing of the high priest with the sacred name, as used in Ezekiel 9:4. We can't both be right, and the difference does, I think, make a huge difference. So, how to decide which context is best? Does it matter more that the Book of Mormon was translated in 1829 in English or that Ezekiel was an exact contemporary of Jacob and also a priest in exile? That is just one word. Soil and nurture for words, Jesus said, can make a hundred-fold difference in yield. And of the Parable of the Sower, he says in Mark 4:13, “Know ye not this parable? And then will ye know all parables?”

the environment, using sources like *View of the Hebrews*. Despite his claims to be an insider, not just LDS but an insider historian speaking for the community, actual LDS historians found his work to be shallow and notably one-sided, ignoring important primary sources and important scholarship throughout.

- David Persuitte, *Joseph Smith and the Origins of the Book of Mormon* 2nd Ed. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2000), which elaborates on the notion of Joseph Smith as a fraudulent money digger and argues for deliberate borrowing from Ethan Smith's *View of the Hebrews*.
- D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998). Quinn postulates that Joseph Smith drew on all sorts of esoteric traditions despite no evidence that Joseph Smith could afford or had even seen any of the esoteric books involved.
- B. H. Roberts, *Studies of the Book of Mormon*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992). This is another discussion of parallels to *View of the Hebrews*, making a devil's advocate case of Book of Mormon dependence from the perspective of 1923. It is worth noting that while Roberts was an LDS authority, much has happened in LDS scholarship since 1923 that he could not consider, and indeed, much has happened since the formal publication of the studies in 1985.
- Robert A. Rees, "The Book of Mormon and Automatic Writing" in *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 15/1 (2006), 5–17. Taves observes that Rees here responds to Scott Dunn's automaticity essay. She does not cite Richard L. Anderson's earlier and, I think, much more important and telling response.
- Susan Straker, "Secret Things, Hidden Things: The Seer Story in the Imaginative Economy of Joseph Smith" in Dan Vogel and Brent Metcalfe, eds., *American Apocrypha: Essays on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002). Straker's essay is the only one in *American Apocrypha* that explores the Book of Mormon narrative in

a sustained way. She argues for parallels between the seer narratives in the text and in Joseph Smith's career as seer.

- Dan Vogel, *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2004). She cites Vogel for his notion of fake plates and hypnotized witnesses. Vogel's book is notable for assuming any parallels he can find or create between Joseph Smith's life and the text demonstrates that Joseph created the text from his own imagination. Vogel's work is also notable for preferring to give preference to his own speculations over the reports of eye-witnesses that he so painstakingly gathered and published.

Her bibliography of contemporary LDS scholarship on the Book of Mormon is not extensive, not up-to-date, and is clearly weighted to skeptical interpretations generally consistent with her secular views. This is not necessarily decisive for her suggestions, but it does raise questions and has implications for the issue of how well her hypothesis accounts for what she has not considered. Even if she had read and listed many other important studies of the Book of Mormon, that doesn't mean she would take them seriously in relation to her study. Having listed Bushman's *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, she would have seen this passage:

Perhaps the most serious failing of the critiques of the Book of Mormon was an inability to deal with the text in any detail. ... The outsiders' yearning to find some rational explanation for the Book of Mormon caused them to hurry their work. Their aim was always to explain away the Book of Mormon rather than understand it. Failing to ground their views in the actual contents of the books, the critiques did not do justice to the work's actual complexity, and their conclusions were unstable, even ephemeral.⁵⁷

Taves's approach may seem sensible and promising from a secular perspective, but a reader like myself, coming to the problem and proposed solution with a great deal of reading that does not appear in her bibliography, may see the implications of her limited choices on context and comparison that would be illuminated by a broader perspective. For example, it is important to see the full implications of the way Taves contextualizes

57. Richard Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginning of Mormonism* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 127–28.

Joseph Smith by placing him in company with Wilson, Schucman, and research on dissociative mental states. In surveying a range of different Joseph Smith histories, Richard Bushman observed that

the context in which [Joseph Smith] is placed profoundly affects how people see the Prophet, since the history selected for a subject colors everything about it. Is he a money digger like hundreds of other superstitious Yankees in his day, a religious fanatic like Muhammad was thought to be in Joseph's time, a prophet like Moses, a religious revolutionary like Jesus? To a large extent, Joseph Smith assumes the character of the history selected for him.⁵⁸

John McDade had observed the same decisive influence of contextualization in his important survey of Jesus research:

There is then a radical dependence between the reconstructed Jesus and the reconstructed context/model: how the context and social model are understood determines how Jesus is understood. "Determines" is not too strong a word, for one of the problems with this approach is that the grid of social and economic context is such a strong factor it can inhibit responsible handling of the actual textual evidence we have for Jesus.⁵⁹

Contextualization has a determining effect, causing Joseph Smith to assume the character of the history selected for him. Taves places Joseph Smith alongside Helen Schucman and Bill Wilson and notions of automaticity and the creativity of highly hypnotizable individuals. That is a soil, context, and nurture designed to grow a particular crop targeting the appetite of her secular audience. One of her sources, Terryl Givens in *By the Hand of Mormon*, included a survey of scholars who contextualize the Book of Mormon in the ancient world. But which context is best? And how do we measure best? Jesus says that the soil and nurture in which a word is placed can lead to different yields, ranging from nothing to a hundred-fold. He also says of the Parable of the Sower, "Know ye not this parable? And how then will ye know all parables?"

58. Richard Bushman, "Joseph Smith's Many Histories" in John W. Welch, ed., *The Worlds of Joseph Smith*, BYU Studies 44/4 (2005), 4. Also compare Alan Goff, "To Insinuate All Ideas and Inevitably Mislead Historical Judgement: Epistemological Metaphor in Mormon Biography" in *International Journal of Mormon Studies*, January 1, 2014, <http://www.ijmsonline.org/archives/3286>.

59. John McDade, "Jesus In Recent Research," *The Month* (December 1998): 495–505.

(Mark 4:13). And as Samuel Clemens says, “The difference between the right word, and almost the right word, is that between a lightning bug and lightning.” The same is true of context.

Alexander Campbell contextualized Joseph Smith by titling his response “Delusions” and by leading off his essay by saying, “Every age of the world has produced imposters and delusions. Jannes and Jambres withstood Moses,”⁶⁰ and he continues with a discussion of a range of “false prophets” and imposters. For his part, Joseph Smith, in his 1838 account, compares himself to “Paul, when he made his defense before King Agrippa” (Joseph Smith History – 1:24). For my part, I spent several years compiling a list of 28 biblical keys for discerning true and false prophets.⁶¹ That seems to me at least a natural and reasonable approach to contextualizing the claims of Joseph Smith, a relevant context in which to examine the puzzle he represents. And it is clear this approach to solving the puzzle of Joseph Smith leads to some very different conclusions regarding how we might compare him to Bill Wilson and Helen Schucman and what we consequently might see as most significant about them.

As Kuhn observes,

Insofar as he is engaged in normal science, the research worker is a solver of puzzles, not a tester of paradigms. Though he may, during the search for a particular puzzle’s solution, try out a number of alternative approaches, rejecting those that fail to yield the desired result, he is not testing the *paradigm* when he does so. Instead he is like the chess player who, with a problem stated and the board physically or mentally before him, tries

60. Alexander Campbell, *Delusions*. (Boston: Benjamin H. Greene, 1832), 5, <https://archive.org/details/delusionsanalysisi01camp>.

61. Kevin Christensen, “Biblical Keys for Discerning True and False Prophets,” FairMormon, copyright 2017, https://www.fairmormon.org/answers/Biblical_Keys_for_Discerning_True_and_False_Prophets. A secular person, or one of a different religious persuasion (say Hindu or Buddhist or Muslim), might reflexively and justifiably label my approach “polemical” when applied to their secular claims, or different religious claims, whether I am willing to put myself under the same microscope or not. If a person does not believe the Bible, or believes the Bible but does not trust my selection and interpretation of the verses, why should they bind themselves to my approach? Simply saying “So what?” can be an effective response for some, though that obviously is not the same thing as a careful and considered response. But if I were not willing to submit Joseph Smith to those 28 Biblical tests, the more accurate and telling label for my refusal would be hypocritical, rather than polemical.

out various alternative moves in the search for a solution. These trial attempts, whether by the chess player or by the scientist, are trials only of themselves, not of the rules of the game.⁶²

The presence of the alternative approach defined by Blass for testing documents also turns out to be a means to try the rules of the game as Taves defines them. And what we know about the rules of paradigm debate from Kuhn means that we compare paradigms in a way that does not completely depend on self-referential arguments. That is, we can frame the comparison that provide reasons that justify “Why us,” rather than just tribal dismissals as “Not us.”

Ian Barbour comments, “As when literary critics evaluate a play, there are both data and criteria held in common, which makes possible a rational discussion even among those whose conclusions differ. There are no *proofs*, but *there are good reasons* for judgements which are not simply matters of personal taste or individual preference.”⁶³

So the existence of a substantial body of work exploring the historicity of the Book of Mormon text may not demonstrate proofs, but it does demonstrate “reasons for judgements which are not simply matters of personal taste.”

Some of the reasons for judgements can arise because, as Kuhn observes, “[P]articularly persuasive arguments can be developed if the new paradigm permits the prediction of phenomena that had been entirely unsuspected while the old one prevailed.”⁶⁴

There is another relevant comparative test to make by reading Richard L. Anderson’s essay “Imitation Gospels and Christ’s Book of Mormon Ministry.” Because his article compares the 3 Nephi account with a range of other modern gospels, many of which were also composed in a manner that invites comparison with “spirit writing” and “automaticity,” this is an important essay to consult in order to evaluate Taves’s arguments. The texts and books that Anderson examines include:

- *The Aquarian Gospel* by Levi S. Dowling, published in 1908. A convert in my ward gave me this to read a few years ago. It is long and draws extensively on the New Testament, but it goes its own way and does not, in my

62. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 144–45.

63. Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms: A Comparative Study of Science and Religion*, 146.

64. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 154.

view, rival the Book of Mormon. Anderson cites many historical inaccuracies and contradictions of scripture.⁶⁵

- *The Archko Volume*. “The supposed editor of a large find of writings was William D. Mahan, a Missouri Presbyterian preacher who was disciplined in 1885 by his local presbytery for plagiarizing Lew Wallace’s *Ben Hur* and publishing ‘Eli’s Story of the Magi’ as a fraudulent ancient document.”⁶⁶
- *The Gospel of the Holy Twelve*. “The medium of receiving this long gospel was the Reverend G. J. R. Ouseley, who left the Church of England and associated with several para-Christian movements before his death in 1906. Some of his writings promoted vegetarianism, also a prominent theme in his revealed additions to the New Testament.”⁶⁷
- *Oahspe*. “A tiny fraction of this ‘Kosmon Bible’ claims to report the historical Jesus. Its author was John Newbrough, a dentist who made a hobby of spiritualism for years. Finally claiming purification to reach the higher spirits, he began his scribal work in 1881 without any record: ‘One morning the light struck both my hands on the back and they went for the typewriter, for some fifteen minutes, very vigorously. I was told not to read what was printed. ... For fifty weeks this continued ... and then it ceased, and I was told to read and publish Oahspe.’ The time of day was before dawn, and the coming of daylight terminated the inspiration each day. The result was published in 1882 and reads like a science-fiction view of history, with strange mortal and extraterrestrial beings that control and conflict. Jesus appears incidentally as an astounding contradiction to gospel and Jewish realities: ‘In the thirty-sixth year of Joshu’s age he was stoned to death in Jerusalem by the Jews that worshipped the heathen Gods.’”⁶⁸
- *The Sorry Tale*. “This justly forgotten novel impressed American reviewers of the World War I generation but can only be reviewed as sterile bombast today. Its notoriety came from author Pearl Curran’s story of receiving

65. Anderson, “Imitation Gospels and Christ’s Book of Mormon Ministry,” 57.

66. *Ibid.*, 57.

67. *Ibid.*, 60.

68. *Ibid.*, 63–64.

dictation of poetry and historical tales from the spirit of a ‘Puritan spinster’ called Patience Worth.”⁶⁹

- *The Urantia Book*. “Published in 1955, this massive volume devotes a third of its space to the story of Christ. But of all the imitation gospels surveyed here, this one offers the fewest clues on its origin.”⁷⁰ Subsequent to Anderson’s 1986 essay, Martin Gardner wrote *Urantia: The Great Cult Mystery* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1995) which describes how physician William Sadler, as early as 1911, conducted interviews with a neighbor who had begun falling into nightly trances. Sadler shared his interest in the trance subject with a group of friends and colleagues who were already meeting for philosophical discussions. The group began conducting interviews with the trance subject, and the results eventually became *The Urantia Book*. I reviewed this for the AML-List in 1995. Gardner makes some superficial comparisons to Joseph Smith and The Book of Mormon. *The Urantia Book* origins via a trance subject and committee involvement over several years strikes me as far more amenable to direct comparison with *A Course in Miracles* than the Book of Mormon.

Anderson’s essay overall seems strikingly relevant to Taves’s subject, and I find it surprising that she did not reference it, at least as a compliment to the essay by Robert Rees responding to Scott Dunn that she does cite. Perhaps she did not know about Anderson, or perhaps Dunn’s response to Anderson in a single footnote defused her interest. According to Dunn, Anderson “discusses spiritualist works about Jesus Christ and makes judgements about their authenticity. His chief criteria are (1) consistency with Mormon interpretations of the Bible and (2) his personal opinion of each work’s literary merit.”⁷¹

Dunn here is so inaccurate and misleading in dismissing Anderson that it seems to me a response to what Dunn imagined Anderson wrote, rather than what he actually produced. Anderson discusses a range of modern Gospels, including but not limited to spiritualist work. And Anderson’s chief criteria involve consistency with known

69. Ibid., 65.

70. Ibid., 68.

71. Scott Dunn, “Automaticity and the Book of Mormon” in Dan Vogel and Brent Metcalfe eds., *American Apocrypha: Essays on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 41.

historical records, including but not limited to the New Testament, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and early Christian writings. He observes that in comparison to modern Apocrypha the Book of Mormon is unique in (1) not contradicting the New Testament; (2) demonstrating affinity with ancient styles and practices, including the Peshier form exemplified in the Dead Sea Scrolls but not known or demonstrated by any other modern Gospel; and (3) demonstrating unique consistency with the criteria non-LDS scholars have created for identifying authentic logia, that is, words of Jesus not found in the New Testament. Anderson also discusses the witnesses to the Book of Mormon as without parallel in any of the other modern gospels. So contrary to Dunn's non-exhaustive footnote response, Anderson does not simply reply on "consistency with Mormon interpretations" nor "his personal opinions" but he cites a range of non-LDS authorities, including scholars who have examined other modern Gospels, such as Enslin, Stendhal, Goodspeed, and Per Beskow. In doing so, he highlights what is different and distinctive about the Book of Mormon, and all of his findings are directly relevant in evaluating the model that Taves offers. These include the following:

- "No apocryphal gospel furnishes any witness who saw its original record, who could be cross-examined concerning it. Like Christ's resurrection itself, the Book of Mormon presents a supernatural claim surrounded by impressive circumstantial evidence."⁷²
- "Depth and dimension permeate Third Nephi but are notably absent from the spurious later gospels. Most are thinly disguised special pleading — making Christ a precursor for Mohammed, promoter of a natural health program, an Eastern mystic, or a cosmic spiritualist. These books mix strange code words and jargon with the known teachings of the Lord. But they are also disconcerting even in the portions that do not conflict with the Gospels, for here they trivialize Jesus into a wordy moralizer. So fictitious gospels must hazard two dangers: contradictions or flattening of dynamic events and vital personality. The gospel forger stands at the crossroads of too much novelty or too little substance."⁷³

72. Anderson, "Imitation Gospels and Christ's Book of Mormon Ministry," 77.

73. *Ibid.*, 80.

- “No modern apocryphal gospel pictures Christ as an expounder of the prophets, but when he appears in this role in Third Nephi, he speaks in a known idiom of ancient Judaism, alternating prophetic verses with interpretive explanations. The Qumran ‘commentaries’ generally quote a part of a verse, one verse, or up to three verses, with interspersed explanations. Early Christian literature has some examples of a chain of quotations with comments, but does not display the above explication of one prophet that makes the Qumran *pesharim* highly unusual. It is improbable that Joseph Smith stumbled onto this teaching form, since the Qumran *peshar* style is distinctive enough to rate a special article in the 1971 *Encyclopaedia Judaica*.⁷⁴

Dunn’s essay showed a particular interest in Pearl Curran’s production of a life of Jesus called *The Sorry Tale*. And Dunn and Taves are both legitimately impressed by comparisons of surface features of her composition to Joseph Smith’s translation. But surface composition does not tell the whole story of the different substances. For example, in making a case that *The Sorry Tale* had not only a translation resembling the Book of Mormon, but an equally impressive content, Dunn writes:

Regarding *The Sorry Tale*, one author notes that “scholars and literary critics agreed that even a lifetime of reading all of the available knowledge of the Holy Land (reading that apparently never took place, but even if it had) still would not have given [Curran] the information to produce a book with such verisimilitude.”⁷⁵

With respect to Curran and verisimilitude, Anderson writes:

Mrs. Curran’s editor stated the plot as follows:

Christ himself is the outstanding and speaking character, though the central figure is a son of the Emperor Tiberius by Theia, a dancing slave, who names him Hatte. He is born outside the walls of Bethlehem on the same night in which Christ was born, and the two lives move on parallel paths to the tragedy on Calvary, where Hatte also is crucified, being the person known as the “unrepentant thief.”

74. Ibid., 88–89.

75. Dunn, “Automaticity and the Book of Mormon,” 28.

This contrived story grinds through 500 pages of simplistic narrative and tedious dialogue before featuring Jesus. The whole is subvictorian prose at its predictable worst, where tears are dropping jewels and bosoms regularly heave. Despite Mrs. Curran's claim of "panoramic" moving pictures in her mind, *The Sorry Tale* notably lacks social and physical details. If they are mentioned, the score for accuracy is low. For instance, Mrs. Curran claimed to envision "the ark as it was at that time restored," but this relic had long since disappeared from Jewish scripture and history. The Roman governor sat in an oriental court, with "vested virgins" dancing before him, and Jesus shocked the masses by dining with the Pharisees, though they are known in the Gospels and Josephus as popularly respected. The unhistorical "eye of the needle" gate is described, with the physically implausible act of the camel inching through it on his knees.

If this *Tale* cannot recreate settings, what is its picture of Christ? The free and rapid dictation shows a patchwork of events from the Gospels — their historical integrity is flaunted in random chronology and modified message. The canonical five loaves and two fishes diminishes to "two fishes and a loaf," and the miraculous is next subtracted. Although all Gospels detail how five thousand were physically fed, *The Sorry Tale* gives a sentimental version of how hunger vanished as the crowd was overwhelmed with truth. The close is an unrealistic platitude on Jesus' lips: "for the body crieth out only when the spirit is barren." Since the *Tale* reports no resurrection, the natural crescendo of Christ's teachings is the Last Supper and the Garden, but here the reader meets no suffering Savior. Emotive prose changes the grim night arrest to a pregnant dawn; the bloody sweat is reduced to a footnote while Christ's insuperable burden becomes a pleasant prayer about "supping sweet the cup." This storybook Jesus gently wanders back to his Apostles, "pausing to pluck a branch and kiss it, plucking up a stone, to smile and leave it fall."

The Sorry Tale spins overdone human tragedy but fades out the divine tragedy of Christ's atonement for sin. Its Jesus teaches an unstructured "kingdom of love" but drops out the realities of

sin and salvation, church and ordinances. Such oversimplified humanism does not match the Christ of the Gospels.⁷⁶

Rather than confront any of these specifics in Anderson's article, Dunn's updates to his 1982 essay for the 2002 *American Apocrypha* settled for an unsupported and inaccurate claim regarding what Anderson wrote. Yet Anderson's work offers a wealth of fresh and important observations in noting how distinct the Book of Mormon is in comparison to a wide range of modern gospels produced by means of automatic writing and dissociative states:

The beginning of this paper noted the continuation of Jesus' sayings in quotations by Paul and by the Christian fathers. Here scholars seek some basis for judging whether these free-floating sayings have historical credibility, since they are not in canonical Gospels. To be considered authentic, the quotation should come from an early source with probable access to authentic information about Christ. But given this condition, how can one separate folklore from responsible tradition? That forces a judgment after first determining these "genealogical" credentials. Then comes the question: is the saying "conceivable in the mouth of Jesus, in view of what the canonical Gospels make known to us of his thought and spirit"?

There are many terse and wholesome utterances, utterly unobjectionable and free from the bias of dubious theology or the tinsel of fantasy, which have appeared to many critics as not inappropriate to the Jesus of the canonical Gospels.

The first half of this paper gave sample quotations from modern apocrypha, showing that their language typically displays platitudes, wordiness, or unfocused mysticism. But Third Nephi joins the four Gospels in the spiritual light reflecting from vivid sayings of the Lord. These are not in obvious positions in the American Gospel, but are spread evenly throughout Christ's teachings as the spontaneous utterances of one who typically sums up his message in concise urgency:

76. Anderson, "Imitation Gospels and Christ's Book of Mormon Ministry," 65–67.

Old things are done away, and all things have become new (3 Nephi 12:47).

Therefore, whoso remembereth these sayings of mine and doeth them, him will I raise up at the last day (3 Nephi 15:1).

Behold, I am the law, and the light (3 Nephi 15:9).

Behold, I am the light which ye shall hold up — that which ye have seen me do (3 Nephi 18:24).

And if it so be that the church is built upon my gospel, then will the Father show forth his own works in it (3 Nephi 27:10).

Because a main goal of scholarship is discovery, studies continue to gather and weigh the noncanonical sayings of Jesus. Out of several hundred possibilities, from one to two dozen are usually selected on the double basis of location in a responsible historical source plus tone reminiscent of Jesus. Third Nephi contains many more vivid sayings than the examples given above. But if these are mingled with other uncanonical words from early sources, they measure up with those most favored in possessing the “terseness and aptness very characteristic of Jesus’s mode of speech.” The objective element is style, the close resemblance to Jesus’ patterns of expression.⁷⁷

Readers of Dunn’s essay are not informed of the existence of the kinds of observations and evidence that Anderson makes regarding the unique and distinctive nature of the Book of Mormon, even in relation to a range of books that rival its claim to be a modern gospel. That Taves did not consult or confront Anderson’s important work makes her book particularly vulnerable in comparison. Kuhn observes that “particularly persuasive arguments can be developed if the new paradigm permits the prediction of phenomena that had been entirely unsuspected while the old one prevailed.”⁷⁸

One of the reasons I enjoy the work of the best LDS scholars in comparison to the work of disaffected LDS and secular critics is that while I am rarely surprised or disturbed by what the critics offer,⁷⁹ I am

77. Anderson, “Imitation Gospels and Christ’s Book of Mormon Ministry,” 95–96.

78. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 154.

79. See Kevin Christensen, “New Wine and New Bottles: Scriptural Scholarship as Sacrament,” *Dialogue* 24/3 (Fall 1991): 121–129. My first publication in LDS

continually astonished by what I learn from scholars like Nibley, Anderson, Welch, Peterson, Tvedtnes, Ricks, Goff, Gardner, and many others. Yet, she did list *By the Hand of Mormon* in her bibliography, a remarkable book published by Oxford University Press for an academic readership.

Taves can take a kind of comfort in knowing that her secular audience, for the most part, will not know or value this body of scholarship. But as Ian Barbour says, a belief in God “makes a difference not only in one’s attitudes and behaviour but in the way one sees the world. One may notice and value features of individual and corporate life which one otherwise might have overlooked.”⁸⁰

Taves mentions the important issue of delusion:

According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*, a delusion is “a false belief based on [an] incorrect inference about external reality that is firmly sustained despite what almost everyone else believes and despite what constitutes incontrovertible and obvious proof or evidence to the contrary” (DSM-5 2013, 819). (269)

This sounds straightforward, except that until we all possess omniscience, we all inevitably possess incorrect inferences about external reality and are therefore all operating under as yet unidentified delusions. The history of science demonstrates over and over again that change can often come through a new insight that goes against what almost everyone else believes. Taves also brings in the concept of “reality monitoring” (260), which raises the question of how best to do it. In considering whether Taves or I and other believing scholars offer a map that more accurately describes the territory of LDS faith, consider the following criteria of worth because they are not paradigm-dependent. Kuhn reports on what matters most in pragmatic practice:

- “[S]ince no paradigm ever solves all the problems it defines, and since no two paradigms leave all the same problems unsolved, paradigm debates always involve the question: Which problems are more significant to have solved?”⁸¹
- “Probably the single most prevalent claim advanced by the proponents of a new paradigm is that they can solve the problems that have led the old one to a crisis.”⁸²

letters grew out of a brief disturbance that generated encouraging insights.

80. Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms: A Comparative Study of Science and Religion*, 56.

81. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 110.

82. *Ibid.*, 153.

- “Claims of this sort are particularly likely to succeed if the new paradigm displays a quantitative precision strikingly better than its older competitor.”⁸³
- “[P]articularly persuasive arguments can be developed if the new paradigm permits the prediction of phenomena that had been entirely unsuspected while the old one prevailed.”⁸⁴
- “These are the arguments, rarely made entirely explicit, that appeal to the individual’s sense of the appropriate or the aesthetic — the new theory is said to be ‘neater’, ‘more suitable’, or ‘simpler’ than the old.”⁸⁵
- “[T]he issue is which paradigm should in the future guide research on problems, many of which neither competitor can yet claim to resolve completely. A decision between alternate ways of practicing science is called for, and in the circumstances that decision must be based less on past achievement than on future promise. ... A decision of that kind can only be made on faith.”⁸⁶
- “First, the new candidate must seem to resolve some generally recognized problem that can be met in no other way. Second, 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.”⁸⁷
- “There are also, however, values to be used in judging whole theories: they must, first and foremost, permit puzzle-formulation and solution; where possible they should be simple, self-consistent, and plausible, compatible, that is, with other theories currently deployed.”⁸⁸
- “In matters like these the resort to shared values rather than to shared rules governing individual choice may be the community’s way of distributing risk and assuring the long-term success of its enterprise.”⁸⁹

83. *Ibid.*, 153–54.

84. *Ibid.*, 154.

85. *Ibid.*, 155.

86. *Ibid.*, 157–58.

87. *Ibid.*, 169.

88. *Ibid.*, 185.

89. *Ibid.*, 186.

Notice that none of the key values Kuhn observes as valuable in pragmatic practice is based on whether or not it is pleasing to a particular audience. So playing to an audience always involves a kind of deference to opinion, to not saying and thinking beyond a given set of assumptions, to accepting the authority of group orthodoxy. But what should matter most is not who has a given set of opinions but why? Are those opinions well grounded? Do I accept audience expectation as a constraint or determiner on my thought and questions, or am I engaged in an open-ended quest for further light and knowledge, considering audience only as an afterthought or side-effect that comes after new insight or discovery?

When Apostle Neal Maxwell addressed the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies in 1991, he quoted Austin Farrar's famous remark about the work of C.S. Lewis:

Though argument does not create conviction, the lack of it destroys belief. What seems to be proved may not be embraced, but what no one shows the ability to defend is quickly abandoned. Rational argument does not create belief, but it maintains a climate in which belief is possible.⁹⁰

Then after the 2012 “change in direction,” new editor Spencer Fluhman explained his choice of audience:

A couple of years ago, Maxwell Institute leaders asked me to advise them on the future of the *Mormon Studies Review*. They were interested in engaging more fully with the rising academic field of the same name, but wondered if the journal should even continue given the already crowded periodical field. My response was brief — well, brief for me — and would not have impressed any capitalists in the room. *Don't worry about the LDS audience*, I said. Other journals have that covered. Speak instead to scholars, period....

The Review's advisory board cured any lingering conflicted feelings. Drop any hybridity goals, they urged, and tilt unreservedly toward the academy. So as it stands, it's the Institute's humble Mormon studies endeavor that seems least

90. Austin Farrer, “Grete Clerk,” quoted in Daniel Peterson, “Elder Neal A. Maxwell on Consecration, Scholarship, and Defense of the Kingdom,” *Interpreter* 7 (2013): vii–xix, <http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/elder-neal-a-maxwell-on-consecration-scholarship-and-the-defense-of-the-kingdom/#more-4243>.

interested in a broad audience — which isn't to say educated Latter-day Saints should feel uninvited!...

All this helps explain why the *Mormon Studies Review's* tilt toward the broader scholarly community is not the sign of an insidious secularism spreading at BYU. For us, it's primarily a question of audience, voice, and scholarly niche.⁹¹

This change in audience has implications. Ours is not the only community that has experienced the results when the universities serve academic interests rather than faith community interests. It is not just a Mormon issue. Compare what happened in recent LDS social history with a survey of trends in biblical studies in the twentieth century:

There is a major crisis in biblical studies of which the churches seem unaware, and there is need for urgent action to ensure that at least in theological colleges something is taught that does not simply rely on university departments and replicate their syllabus and interests. Theological colleges and university departments now have very different agendas....

Biblical studies should serve the needs of the Churches; there are other goals, too, but if the needs of the churches are not even considered, something has to be amiss. Perhaps the time has come to break free from the Faustian pact between Church and Academy. *We are unlikely to solve the problems currently facing biblical studies using the methods which created them.* What we need is an approach, soundly based in scholarship, which enables us to stand where they stood, look where they looked, read what they wrote and glimpse what they saw.⁹²

Barker has also more recently addressed the question of audience for scholars, and the relationship between a scholar's allegiances, and the work they produce.

There is no such thing as objective biblical scholarship, that is, biblical scholarship produced by those with no faith commitment. I have often said that a professor of French who

91. Spencer Fluhman, "On Audience and Voice in Mormon Studies Publishing," *Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship* (blog), November 21, 2016, <https://mi.byu.edu/intro-msr-v4/>.

92. Margaret Barker, "Reflections on Biblical Studies in the Twentieth Century" (paper, 2000), <http://www.margaretbarker.com/Papers/ReflectionsOnBiblicalStudies.pdf>.

had never been to France did not speak the language and doubted that France even existed would not be taken seriously. *The same should apply with biblical studies, but it does not.*

The result is that the much biblical study produced in the UK, outside the faith-based institutions, is of no use to the consumers of biblical scholarship, that is, the faith-based communities. Any medical school that produced no graduates fit to practice medicine and no research relevant to the human body would be closed down. *The same should apply with biblical studies, but it does not.*

All the independent biblical scholars that I know work from a faith-based perspective, and it is with us that the future lies.⁹³

I take Barker as a more appealing paradigmatic example than Taves. But of course, as I said at the beginning, I am not part of her secular audience, so my opinions may not have any weight in that community.

So what about my audience? Who are they? In my case, it is not just an academic community but includes a community of believers as well as those who wrestle with belief. I'm a believer who seeks "further light and knowledge," who seeks answers for my own questions, and who seeks to share what I find useful. I don't just write to believers. I also write for those who don't know what to believe or whether to believe. I write for people who share my love for "seeking out of the best books words of wisdom" and for "proving contraries" and for checking footnotes and sources. I write knowing that what I do is not just an abstract exercise designed to please people who sign my checks or approve my promotions. Because I'm an unpaid amateur, doing what I do out of gratitude, love, and passion, none of that professional aspect applies. I know what I write may have both positive and negative consequences, affecting not only the lives of individuals who read what I offer but also the lives of their loved ones in the present, their children, and generations unborn. So doing what I do involves an inescapable responsibility, yet I cannot take myself too seriously because I know that for all my effort, anyone can dismiss all I have done with a mere "So what?" But most of all, I cannot forget that as a believer, my audience also includes God.

93. Margaret Barker, "Being an Independent Scholar," *Providence, Divine Action and the Church* (blog), November 17, 2012, <http://christpantokrator.blogspot.com/search/label/Barker%3A%20%27Being%20an%20Independent%20Scholar%27>.

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