

# INTERPRETER

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A JOURNAL OF MORMON SCRIPTURE

Volume 11 · 2014 · Pages vii-xxix

## The Sibling Scandals of the Resurrection

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Offprint Series

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ISSN 2372-1227 (print)

ISSN 2372-126X (online)

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# THE SIBLING SCANDALS OF THE RESURRECTION

Daniel C. Peterson

I've recently picked Stephen T. Davis's *Risen Indeed: Making Sense of the Resurrection* up again.<sup>1</sup> It's an impressive book that had a pivotal effect on my thinking when it first appeared. Davis, the Russell K. Pitzer Professor of Philosophy at Claremont McKenna College in California, argues that "Christians are within their intellectual rights in believing that Jesus was raised from the dead."<sup>2</sup> "The thesis of the book," he explains, "is that the two central Christian resurrection claims — namely, that Jesus was bodily raised from the dead and that we will all be raised from the dead — are defensible claims."<sup>3</sup>

Reading it now, certain elements in *Risen Indeed* seem to me to shed light on the task, nature, and challenges of apologetics more generally.

Davis explains that he's not doing what he calls "hard apologetics," in which the attempt is to prove a religious claim true. Rather, he's doing "soft apologetics," trying to demonstrate that a religious claim is plausible, reasonable, and defensible. This appears to me a very important distinction.

Moreover, I judge that this is what the evidentiary situation will sustain with regard to the fundamental and crucial claims of Christian theism in general and the claims of the Restoration in particular — and I strongly suspect that this is exactly where the evidentiary situation is divinely intended to remain,

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1 Stephen T. Davis, *Risen Indeed: Making Sense of the Resurrection* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993).

2 Davis, *Risen Indeed*, 1.

3 Davis, *Risen Indeed*, vii.

pending Judgment Day. If the evidence for those claims were as conclusive as a proof in geometry, no meaningful intellectual freedom would remain to us. There can be no “opinions” as to whether, say, triangles ABC and DEC are congruent, once a valid proof demonstrating that they *are* congruent has been provided and accurately understood. Personal, subjective reactions to the matter are irrelevant at that stage.

Likewise, if God were to reveal himself directly and conclusively, he would destroy our freedom, so overwhelming would that revelation be. The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (d. 1855) expresses this point memorably in his *Philosophical Fragments*, by means of a parable about a king and a maiden. How can the king reveal his love to a maiden of humble parentage — given the huge gulf between them of rank, status, and wealth — without effectively coercing and crushing her? Would her affections, if she seemed to return them, be genuine or sincere? His dilemma is, “Not to reveal oneself is the death of love, to reveal oneself is the death of the beloved.” The only choice finally open to the king is to court the maiden indirectly, by descending to her station, by taking on the character of a servant. (Think in this regard, as Kierkegaard intends that you should, of the coming of the mortal Son of God.)<sup>4</sup> But this is no mere costume change. In order to be convincing as a servant, the king must really *act* as one.<sup>5</sup>

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4 The term *condescension*, as it appears in 1 Nephi 11:16 (“Knowest thou the condescension of God?”), doesn’t mean, as it typically does in modern English, to patronize, or to act in a smugly superior way. As documented in Noah Webster’s great 1828 American dictionary, Joseph Smith’s contemporaries understood the word to mean “Voluntary descent from rank, dignity or just claims; relinquishment of strict right; submission to inferiors in granting requests or performing acts which strict justice does not require.”

5 See Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments* (Johannes Climacus), edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 26–30.

So the evidence for the claims of Christianity and of Mormonism isn't coercive. The facts permit and even, to some extent, warrant skepticism.

I've long been fascinated, however, even intrigued, by the realization that evidence that I find very impressive is often completely dismissed by others whose reasoning abilities don't seem obviously defective and who don't seem deficient in character. (I'm omitting from the discussion those who simply, consciously or not, prefer a life of godless, or effectively godless, sin. Such people exist. I'm personally acquainted with quite a number of them — apatheists, one wit has called some of them — but they aren't my concern here. Their resistance to faith and commitment won't likely be overcome by an essay or an argument.)

I have in mind as a representative specimen of the issue I'll be discussing a specific individual, a bright and articulate lapsed Latter-day Saint, who simply cannot understand why I find the testimonies of the witnesses to the Book of Mormon so very forceful. He sees no significant evidentiary value whatever in what they have to say. By contrast, I absolutely cannot understand his failure to grasp the implications of their transparently sincere eyewitness accounts. We talked past each other so long that we finally abandoned the effort.

Based upon many years of observation, it's obvious to me that decisions regarding what evidence we will permit to count in our thinking about politics, religion, and other weighty topics are made within a much broader context than this or that specific argument. Stephen Davis, having effectively come to the same conclusion, articulates the matter in a helpful way. "All people interpret their experience within a certain philosophical framework," he writes.

The philosophical assumptions of many people preclude a belief in the existence of God and the possibility

of miracles. Such people presumably reject the resurrection not because the evidence for it, considered neutrally, is weak. It would seem closer to the truth to say that their commitment to naturalism gives them a perspective on the resurrection such that the evidence for it *must* be weak. Surely if the resurrection were not essentially miraculous (if it were, say, more like the event of the crucifixion), few rational persons would doubt it. Naturalists reject the resurrection primarily because it does not fit with their worldview. The essentially miraculous nature of the resurrection impels them to discount the evidence for it despite their inability to explain what *did* happen or how the disciples came to believe in the resurrection.<sup>6</sup>

Very few people deny the historicity of the crucifixion of Jesus. (I'll shortly comment briefly on those who do.) His execution under Pontius Pilate involves nothing intrinsically miraculous or divine; it is without controversy that the Romans crucified thousands upon thousands of quite ordinary mortals. Analogously, there's no mystery about the fact that a marble figure of Brigham Young is permitted to stand in the United States Capitol's National Statuary Hall as a representative of the State of Utah: His achievements were public and widely recognized and admired, and, although they're certainly susceptible

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6 Davis, *Risen Indeed*, 18–19. On pages 10–11, Davis defines the term *miracle* as follows: “A miracle is an event E that (1) is brought about by God and (2) is contrary to the prediction of a law of nature that we have compelling reason to believe is true. That is, the law predicts that, given the circumstances preceding E, some event other than E will occur; E occurs because God causes E to occur; and no other law of nature or set of laws of nature could have helped us to have predicted, given the circumstances, that E would have occurred. Now it is important to note that the occurrence of an event like E, irregular and unpredictable as it is, does not vitiate natural laws. Science is not overturned, because natural laws describe and predict not whatever happens but whatever happens in a regular and predictable way.”

of a religious interpretation and appreciation, they don't typically entail controversial miracle-claims. By contrast — the hypothetical is moot, of course, since he never even came to Utah — placing a statue of Joseph Smith in the Capitol would probably never be allowed, because the very essence of his claim to recognition involves accounts of miracles that must either be accepted or flatly denied.

Here again, Stephen Davis is helpful:

*A soft miracle*, let us say, is a miraculous event that religious skeptics can consistently agree has occurred; it is just that they will disagree with religious believers on its cause and meaning. That is to say, they can affirm that the event occurred but deny that it is a miracle ... If after having been diagnosed to be suffering from a terminal and untreatable cancer, Jones is found to be well and free of cancer after having prayed and fasted, this may well constitute a soft miracle. Skeptics can consistently agree that Jones was gravely ill but now is well; they will simply deny that Jones's recovery was due to God or that it violated any natural laws. A *hard miracle*, on the other hand, is one that is very difficult for religious skeptics to explain naturalistically, and so skeptics will not want to allow that it has occurred at all. The resurrection of Jesus appears to be a hard miracle: it does not seem likely that skeptics would be able to affirm that it occurred (at least not in the manner in which it is described in the Gospels) without abandoning their religious skepticism. The strategy of consistent skeptics must accordingly be to argue that the event did not in fact occur.<sup>7</sup>

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7 Davis, *Risen Indeed*, 11–12.

A soft miracle is a highly improbable event that neither I nor the experts (the doctors, in my above example) can explain; but I can at least *imagine* a possible naturalistic explanation, or can rationally imagine that there is one. If what appears to be a soft miracle is in fact a miracle, however, the true explanation of the event must be that it was caused by God (as in the case of the hard miracle). A hard miracle, on the other hand, is an event that is so highly improbable that I cannot even imagine a plausible naturalistic explanation of it.<sup>8</sup>

The transmission of the Bible to us from the ancient world is, at best, a soft miracle in Davis's sense. Unbelievers can accept — cannot plausibly deny — that it comes from the ancient world. But they need not admit divine involvement in that process. Good naturalistic accounts of how the ancient biblical writings reached us are easily available. The situation with the Book of Mormon is very different. It's very difficult to imagine how the semiliterate farm boy Joseph Smith could have obtained and translated a record from the Pre-Columbian Americas without divine assistance, so unbelievers in miracles generally (or in Joseph's prophetic claims in particular) must deny that it originated in antiquity. And they must, if they are to be taken very seriously, explain how, in fact, it was created in modern times.

"The nonbelievers," writes Davis of those who deny the resurrection of Christ,

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8 Davis, *Risen Indeed*, 12. A good example of a "soft miracle" as Davis defines the term is the Nephite victory, under Moroni, over the Lamanites led by Zerahemnah. Moroni ascribes the outcome of the battle to God, whereas Zerahemnah, an unbeliever, credits Moroni's own superior military preparations. (See Alma 44:1–10.) Both are plausible explanations.



are probably convinced of their position not primarily because of evidence or arguments in its favor but because it is entailed by the worldview that they accept. Let's call that worldview *naturalism* and define it in terms of the following four statements:

1. Nature alone exists. The word *nature* is difficult to define precisely, but let us say that it is the sum total of what could in principle be observed by human beings or be studied by methods analogous to those used in the natural sciences. ("Nature" could also perhaps be defined as a sum total of that which consist of matter/energy — i.e., as the physical realm. For our purposes it will not matter which definition we choose.) Accordingly, naturalism excludes God, or least the theistic God.
2. Nature is eternal. Nature is an uncreated thing; there is no moment in time when it does not exist; nature is not contingent.
3. Nature is uniform. There are no nonnatural events (e.g., miracles); rather, nature is regular, continuous.
4. Every event is explicable. In principle, at least, any event can be explained in terms of nature or natural processes (i.e., by explanatory methods similar to those used in the natural sciences).<sup>9</sup>

The person to whom I've alluded above, with whom I've discussed the evidentiary value of the testimonies of the Book of Mormon Witnesses, isn't, so far as I'm aware, an atheist. However, practically speaking, he's an atheist with regard to the claims of Mormonism. For reasons extrinsic to the particular matter of the Witnesses, he has concluded that God is and was absent from the fundamental events of the Restoration.

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9 Davis, *Risen Indeed*, 17–18.

Hence, in this matter at least, Stephen Davis's remarks about naturalism are entirely apt, even in his case.

Some have taken their commitment to naturalism so far that they actually deny the historical existence of Jesus, which seems to me, and to virtually everybody else who has given the matter serious and sustained attention, an obvious bridge too far. The view is a minority one, and, in a sense, scarcely worth much attention. But it seems to be spreading a bit, so I've decided to address it.

Consider, for example, the case of the extraordinarily prolific Bart Ehrman. Currently James A. Gray Distinguished Professor of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and a respected New Testament scholar, he's published a number of academic works as well as, by my count, at least four *New York Times* bestsellers.

Formerly a fundamentalist Protestant and biblical inerrantist but unable to square that position with his studies, he moved during graduate school to liberal Christianity. Today, though, he reports, "I am an agnostic with atheist leanings," and his popular books have criticized basic traditional Christian views of Jesus and the Bible.

Given that background, it's likely that many nonbelievers, hearing that an upcoming book of his would pose the question *Did Jesus Exist?*, expected him to answer "No." If they did, though, they've surely been disappointed. The subtitle to his book is *The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth*, and that is what he seeks to set forth.<sup>10</sup>

Ehrman says in *Did Jesus Exist?* that he urgently wanted to get to the topic of how Jesus came to be seen as divine, and he promises that his next book will be devoted to that subject.

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10 Bart D. Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist? The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2013).

As, in fact, it now has been.<sup>11</sup> Already in this volume, though, he offers some hints (scarcely surprising to those familiar with his work and similar New Testament scholarship) of what he intended to argue but explains that, to his surprise, he felt obliged to deal first with a more pressing prior issue: Before debating who Jesus really was, we have to decide whether he ever even lived.

Every week, Ehrman reports, he receives two or three emails asking whether Jesus actually existed. “When I started getting these emails, some years ago now, I thought the question was rather peculiar and I did not take it seriously. Of course Jesus existed. Everyone knows he existed. Don’t they?”

But, clearly, they don’t. So he looked into the matter and discovered a whole “literature,” as it were, dedicated to arguing that Jesus is a mythical figure, no more real, historically speaking, than Zeus or Frodo. He knew, of course, that the notion that Jesus was mere fiction had been the dominant view in the officially atheistic Soviet Union for decades, but he was surprised to learn that it’s now become the majority view in some areas of the West, including parts of Scandinavia.

Professionals in the field of New Testament and early Christian studies ignore this body of “mythicist” writing, Ehrman says. (If pressed, almost all regard it — to the extent that they’ve ever thought of it at all — as the work of hobbyist cranks.)<sup>12</sup> None of those who have produced it, he observes,

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11 Bart D. Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2014) has now appeared. So has at least one reply: Michael F. Bird, Craig A. Evans, Simon J. Gathercole, Charles E. Hill, and Chris Tilling, *How God became Jesus: The Real Origins of Belief in Jesus’ Divine Nature—A Response to Bart D. Ehrman* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014). Jewish scholar Daniel Boyarin’s *The Jewish Gospels: The Story of the Jewish Christ* (New York: The New Press, 2012) also offers an interesting if indirect counterpoint to Ehrman’s arguments.

12 They might likely say the same thing, of course, about Latter-day Saint apologetics. But I’ve met very few non-Mormon scholars (at most, one or two) who have had even a nodding acquaintance with Mormon apologetic writing.

are scholars trained in the New Testament and early Christian history holding relevant academic appointments at mainstream institutions. Of the scholars with the appropriate professional background and employment, he says, “none of them, to my knowledge, has any doubts that Jesus existed. ... The view that Jesus existed is held by virtually every expert on the planet.”

Now obviously, and as Ehrman expressly admits, the sheer fact that the consensus of experts overwhelmingly — indeed, essentially unanimously — declares that Jesus was a real historical person doesn’t prove that he actually was. Nor does it, as such, refute the “mythicists.” Consensus opinion has often been (and will often be) wrong. That’s why he wrote his book. In clear, accessible prose, it lays out a series of arguments for an authentically historical Jesus. Ehrman has, he says, “no vested interest in the matter.”

“I am not a Christian, and I have no interest in promoting a Christian cause or a Christian agenda.”

“My life and views of the world would be approximately the same whether or not Jesus existed. My beliefs would vary little. The answer to the question of Jesus’ historical existence will not make me more or less happy, content, hopeful, likable, rich, famous or immortal. But as a historian I think evidence matters. And the past matters. And for anyone to whom both evidence and the past matter, a dispassionate consideration of the case makes it quite plain: Jesus did exist.”

Some time ago, I read the online claim, from yet another disaffected Latter-day Saint (this one quite prominent in the news over the past several years), that Jesus probably didn’t exist. It’s a matter of faith, he said. (He’s said the same thing on several occasions.)

But he’s wrong. It’s not. Bart Ehrman is living proof that it’s a matter of historical evidence, not of faith. And Professor

Ehrman is not alone.<sup>13</sup> “Jesus existed,” Ehrman writes, “and those vocal persons who deny it do so not because they have considered the evidence with the dispassionate eye of the historian, but because they have some other agenda that this denial serves. From a dispassionate point of view, there was a Jesus of Nazareth.”

So much for a small band of rather idiosyncratic extremists in the unbelieving camp. In fairness, though, I need to put on record the fact that it’s not only unbelievers who make decisions about how to weigh various arguments and facts on the basis of their overall worldviews. Doing so, while it always risks becoming dogmatic closed-mindedness on the one hand or uncritical credulity on the other, is inescapable and, indeed, within limits, necessary:

Similarly, believers probably find their position convincing not primarily because of evidence or arguments in its favor but because it dovetails with the worldview they accept. Let’s call that worldview *supernaturalism*. (I am not arguing that one must consciously be a supernaturalist or must consciously convert to supernaturalism *before* one can accept that the resurrection of Jesus occurred.) We can define supernaturalism in terms of an affirmation of the following four statements:

1. Something besides nature exists — namely, God.

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13 There is also now, for example, Maurice Casey’s (typically) rather crotchety and argumentative *Jesus: Evidence and Argument or Mythicist Myths?* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014). Casey was, until his death on 10 May 2014, Emeritus Professor of New Testament Languages and Literature at the University of Nottingham, in the United Kingdom. He described himself as “completely irreligious” (39) and said that he “left the Christian faith in 1962” (37), but his new book subjects those who deny the existence of Jesus to a withering (not to say contemptuous) critique.

2. Nature depends for its existence on God.
3. The regularity of nature can be and occasionally is interrupted by miraculous acts of God.
4. Such divine acts are humanly quite unpredictable and inexplicable.<sup>14</sup>

The most serious contemporary criticisms of the Book of Mormon and of Mormonism more broadly tend to come not from self-proclaimed orthodox (i.e., usually Evangelical) Christians, but from self-identified atheistic materialists or naturalists. The Utah-based historian Dale Morgan, largely forgotten today but still much admired in certain small contemporary circles, wrote a 1945 letter to the believing Latter-day Saint historian Juanita Brooks. In it, he identifies the fundamental issue with unusual candor:

With my point of view on God, I am incapable of accepting the claims of Joseph Smith and the Mormons, be they however so convincing. If God does not exist, how can Joseph Smith's story have any possible validity? I will look everywhere for explanations except to the ONE explanation that is the position of the church.<sup>15</sup>

In *Risen Indeed*, Stephen Davis remarks that

believers point to something of an embarrassment in the position of those who do not believe in the

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14 Davis, *Risen Indeed*, 18. On pages 28–34, Davis seeks to refute the notion that history must be done on the basis of naturalistic assumptions and cannot admit the supernatural—an idea that, he shows, has been adopted even by some theologians. (I'm well aware, by the way, that the term *supernatural* is at least slightly problematic, and particularly so for Latter-day Saints. Its problems, though, don't affect the present argument in any substantial way, so I leave consideration of them for another time and place.)

15 Dale Morgan to Juanita Brooks, dated 15 December 1945 at Arlington, Virginia. Transcribed in John Phillip Walker, ed., *Dale Morgan on Early Mormonism: Correspondence and a New History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986), 84–91. The quoted passage occurs on page 87.

resurrection: their inability to offer an acceptable alternative explanation of the known facts surrounding the resurrection of Jesus. The old nineteenth-century rationalistic explanations (hallucination, swoon theory, stolen body, wrong tomb, etc.) all seem to collapse of their own weight once spelled out, and no strong new theory has emerged as the consensus of scholars who deny that the resurrection occurred.<sup>16</sup>

A similar situation obtains, in my judgment, with regard to the Book of Mormon and certain other elements of the Restoration. While, for instance, this or that aspect of the Book of Mormon can, hypothetically, be accounted for by means of something within Joseph Smith's early nineteenth-century information environment, a fully comprehensive counterexplanation for Joseph's claims remains promised but manifestly unprovided. Critics have disagreed over the nearly two centuries since the First Vision about whether Joseph was brilliant or stupid, whether he was sincerely hallucinating or cunningly conscious of his fraud, whether he concocted the Book of Mormon alone or with co-conspirators (their own identity either hotly debated or completely unknown), whether he was a cynical atheist or a pious fraud defending Christianity, and so forth.

Sometimes, indeed, individual critics haven't settled these questions within their own minds, and their books and articles alternate back and forth between incompatible answers. "And Elijah came unto all the people, and said, How long halt ye between two opinions? if the Lord be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him. And the people answered him not a word."<sup>17</sup>

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16 Davis, *Risen Indeed*, 16.

17 1 Kings 18:21.

In an exchange with a vocal atheist ex-Mormon quite a few years ago, my friend and colleague William Hamblin asked what I regard as a basic and, in the end, unavoidable question: Assuming, for the sake of the argument, that Joseph Smith never had any golden plates pertaining to the Book of Mormon — which was that particular atheist’s position — did Joseph understand that he didn’t have any plates, or did he imagine that he did?

The two options seem to me to exhaust the possibilities. I cannot see, for example, how the approach of the non-Mormon historian Ann Taves to what she terms “the contentious issue of the materiality of the golden plates” can ultimately sustain itself. “The golden plates,” she correctly observes, “take us straight into one of the most interesting challenges: taking the whole range of evidence and views on contentious claims into account and making our way through them as scholars in as transparent a fashion as possible.” “I am setting up the ‘puzzle’ of the golden plates,” explains Professor Taves, “with a claim that each ‘side’ holds dear — that is, that Joseph Smith was not a deceiver or deluded and that there were no ancient golden plates. Setting it up that way provides an intellectual challenge, but one that reflects a religious studies approach at its best.”<sup>18</sup>

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18 See Ann Taves and Spencer Fluhman, “Mormon Studies in the Academy: A Conversation Between Ann Taves and Spencer Fluhman,” *Mormon Studies Review* 1 [sic] [2013]: 9–16. Her way of looking at the question accords comfortably with the rather ecumenical or nonsectarian “religious studies”/“Mormon studies” orientation recently adopted by the newly repurposed Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship and fostered, among other places, in its relaunched *Mormon Studies Review* at Brigham Young University. (Blair Hodges, the Maxwell Institute’s public communications specialist since late 2012 and now its acquisitions and development editor for Mormon studies book titles, approvingly cites Catholic writer Massimo Introvigne’s contention that most scholars are more interested in questions about the “meaning, historical function, and consequences” of elements of Mormon belief than in arguing about whether golden plates really existed.” [Blair Dee Hodges, “Mormon Studies: A Bibliographic Essay,” *Mormon Studies Review* 1 (sic) (2013): 227–228.]) In that same issue of the Maxwell Institute’s flagship journal, Notre Dame



Unfortunately for her enterprise, though, if I understand it correctly, it's not even slightly likely that the two opposing claims can be coherently reconciled. Any truce on the matter is very unlikely to prove stable. Those who deny the existence of the plates will have to posit that he was either detached from reality or a fraud. And those disposed to deny that he was mad or a liar will feel obliged — as they should — to respond.

The famous trilemma posed by C. S. Lewis regarding Christ in his *Mere Christianity* offers, I think, a rather close analogy:

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: "I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God." That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon; or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.<sup>19</sup>

In Professor Hamblin's case — assuming that Joseph Smith had no golden plates, was he or was he not aware that he didn't? — his discussion partner responded rather indignantly

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historian Thomas Tweed links the supposed plates of the Book of Mormon with "magic and the occult." (Thomas Tweed, "Beyond 'Surreptitious Staring': Migration, Missions, and the Generativity of Mormonism for the Comparative Translocative Study of Religion," *Mormon Studies Review* 1 [sic] [2013]: 20.)

19 C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 52.

that he refused to be imprisoned within such simplistic and juvenile thinking. But, offended dignity aside, the question does eventually need to be answered by anybody who purports to offer an alternative account of the rise of Mormonism. Refusal to do so reminds me of the technique, essential (even definitional) to guerrilla or partisan warfare theory, of constant attack and retreat, of refusal to occupy — and, thus, to be obliged to hold and defend — territory. The problem is that, in order ultimately to win the war, guerrilla fighters eventually need to seize and hold territory. And, in order to do this, they need to transform themselves into more conventional armies (“regularization,” Mao Zedong called it), to stake out their own territorial claims — which then requires them to defend their holdings against attacks.<sup>20</sup>

The matter is really remarkably similar to the dilemma posed by the supposed resurrection of Christ, as Professor Davis describes that challenge: “If the disciples knew that Jesus was not really risen, they were charlatans. If they believed he was risen when in fact he was not, they were dupes.”<sup>21</sup> There seems no easy third way.

This is vitally important because, as Stephen Davis declares, “The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the decisive disproof of all forms of deism that exclude divine activity from the created universe: it shows that God *can* act in history, and has.”<sup>22</sup> And much the same challenge is posed by the Book of Mormon and the narrative of the Restoration: If Joseph Smith’s fundamental

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20 I discuss this aspect of guerrilla warfare theory and practice in Daniel C. Peterson, “The Gadianton Robbers as Guerilla Warriors,” in *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin, eds. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 146–173. The essay is available online at <http://publications.maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/fullscreen/?pub=1108&index=9>.

21 Davis, *Risen Indeed*, 15–16.

22 Davis, *Risen Indeed*, 25.

claims are true, they show that God acted not only in ancient history, but in modern times.<sup>23</sup>

Some have tried to find a third way, attempting to accept the resurrection while deliteralizing or “demythologizing” it — i.e., to retain it while denying its historicity — and some, on a much smaller scale, have recently been trying to do the same with the Book of Mormon and the prophetic claims of Joseph Smith.

“It is impossible to use the electric light and the wireless,” the German theologian Rudolf Bultmann (d. 1976) famously announced,

and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of daemons and spirits. We may think we can manage it in our own lives, but to expect others to do so is to make the Christian faith unintelligible and unacceptable to the modern world.<sup>24</sup>

Other theologians, unwilling to surrender the pleasant story of the resurrection of Jesus but equally unwilling or unable to take it as literal and historical fact, have hurried to

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23 See Doctrine and Covenants 20:8–12.

24 Rudolf Bultmann, “New Testament and Mythology,” in *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate*, ed. Hans Werner Bartsch, trans. Reginald H. Fuller (London: SPCK, 1960), 5. One is reminded immediately of John Stuart Mill’s brief discussion, in his classic 1859 essay *On Liberty*, of “the remarkable phenomenon of Mormonism.” “Much might be said,” he wrote, “on the unexpected and instructive fact, that an alleged new revelation, and a religion founded on it ... is believed by hundreds of thousands, and has been made the foundation of a society, in the age of newspapers, railways, and the electric telegraph.” (John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, ed. Stephen Collini [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989], 91.) Mill’s attitude toward Joseph Smith and Mormonism is quite negative, but it seems a bit churlish and ungrateful to complain, since, admirable and pioneering libertarian that he was, he was raising his voice to defend the right of the Latter-day Saints to be left alone so that they could live according to their faith.

find other happy meanings in it. “Talk of the resurrection of Jesus,” wrote Willi Marxsen (d. 1993)

is an interpretation designed to express the fact that my faith has a source and that source is Jesus. ... Jesus is risen in that His offer meets us today and in that, if we accept it, He gives us this new life.<sup>25</sup>

All the evangelists want to show that the activity of Jesus goes on. ... But the authors start from a reality. They came to believe in Jesus after Good Friday. They express this in pictorial terms. But what they want to say is simply: “We have come to believe.”<sup>26</sup>

But to believe in *what*, precisely?

“What actually happened on that first Easter morning,” the Anglo-American theologian Norman Perrin (d. 1976) rather incomprehensibly explains, “is that it became possible to know Jesus as ultimacy in the historicity of the everyday.”<sup>27</sup> Thomas Sheehan is every bit as opaque himself, when he tells his readers that the notion that Jesus “was raised” merely means that he “was taken up (in whatever fashion) into God’s eschatological future.”<sup>28</sup> Simon Peter, Sheehan writes, came to believe that “Jesus was now living in God’s future.”<sup>29</sup>

“When the liturgy says ‘The Lord is risen! The Lord is risen indeed!’,” Robert Scuka says,

this is not to be understood as a claim about the personal destiny of Jesus. Rather, it is a way of acknowledging the

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25 Willi Marxsen, *The Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM, 1970), 143, 184.

26 Marxsen, *The Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth*, 77, 156.

27 Norman Perrin, *The Resurrection according to Matthew, Mark and Luke* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 78.

28 Thomas Sheehan, *The First Coming: How the Kingdom of God Became Christianity* (New York: Random House, 1986), 111.

29 Sheehan, *The First Coming*, 113.

participant's own experience of the life-giving power of the Spirit that is understood to derive from Jesus, an experience of being liberated from the bondage ... of self-preoccupation, and of being freed to live in joyful acceptance of the gift that is life. ... [It] has less to do with anything that is thought to have happened to Jesus himself than it does with the Christian's experience of liberation from bondage that *is* new life.<sup>30</sup>

However, Stephen Davis, trained in Anglo-American analytic philosophy, a tradition that prizes precision in concept and clarity of expression, isn't very patient with this sort of talk: "Does this manner of speaking make any sense at all?" he asks. "What does it mean to be living 'now' 'in the future'?"<sup>31</sup>

In other words, reductive theorists say that "Jesus is risen" means, first, something like "Jesus still has influence on us today" or "We have a vivid sense that 'he is still with us' in our memory of him" or "Jesus' life and teachings still guide and influence our lives today" or "Our lives have been transformed and liberated by Jesus." Second, the words "Jesus is risen" constitute — so they say — an invitation to others to live life in a Christ-like or Christian way. That is the meaning of the Christian proclamation of the resurrection.<sup>32</sup>

There is, of course, nothing even remotely wrong with being influenced or feeling liberated by Jesus, nor with remembering him or being guided by his teachings. Quite the contrary. But to reduce his resurrection to merely our subjective feelings — to interpret it as something that happens to us rather than as something that happened to him — is to create quite a different

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30 Robert F. Scuka, "Resurrection: Critical Reflections on a Doctrine in Search of a Meaning," *Modern Theology* 6 (October 1989): 79–80.

31 Davis, *Risen Indeed*, 36 note 26.

32 Davis, *Risen Indeed*, 37.

religion than the historic Christian faith. And it may well, someday, earn the rebuke that the late American poet, critic, and double Pulitzer-Prize-winning novelist John Updike warns us about in his “Seven Stanzas at Easter”:

Make no mistake: if He rose at all  
 it was as His body;  
 if the cells’ dissolution did not reverse, the molecules  
 reknit, the amino acids rekindle,  
 the Church will fall.  
 It was not as the flowers,  
 each soft spring recurrent;  
 it was not as His Spirit in the mouths and fuddled eyes  
 of the eleven apostles;  
 it was as His flesh: ours.  
 The same hinged thumbs and toes,  
 the same valved heart  
 that — pierced — died, withered, paused, and then  
 regathered out of enduring Might  
 new strength to enclose.  
 Let us not mock God with metaphor,  
 analogy, sidestepping, transcendence,  
 making of the event a parable, a sign painted in the  
 faded credulity of earlier ages:  
 let us walk through the door.  
 The stone is rolled back, not papier-maché,  
 not a stone in a story,  
 but the vast rock of materiality that in the slow grinding  
 of time will eclipse for each of us  
 the wide light of day.  
 And if we will have an angel at the tomb,  
 make it a real angel,  
 weighty with Max Planck’s quanta, vivid with hair,  
 opaque in the dawn light, robed in real linen

spun on a definite loom.

Let us not seek to make it less monstrous,  
for our own convenience, our own sense of beauty,  
lest, awakened in one unthinkable hour, we are  
embarrassed by the miracle,  
and crushed by remonstrance.<sup>33</sup>

Latter-day Saints, too, need to resist the transformation of the faith that moved their spiritual ancestors from New York to Ohio, from Ohio to Missouri, from Missouri to Illinois, from Illinois to the Great Basin West, and from the Great Basin West around the world into mere metaphor, analogy, or parable. The materiality of the golden plates, brute fact, was, I think, partly intended to defend against precisely that.

The plates, and the Book of Mormon, are intended to force a choice. And they have, in fact, done so since the earliest days of the Restoration. The rather naïve account of a “Mrs. Palmer,” who grew up not far from the family of Joseph and Lucy Mack Smith, speaks with simple eloquence of the Prophet Joseph Smith’s character, but also illustrates the way in which the Book of Mormon obliged even people of good will to decide, for or against his prophetic claims. Joseph’s initial vision could be dismissed as merely a subjective dream. The Book of Mormon, however, could not:

My father owned a farm near that of the Smith family, in New York. My parents were friends of the Smith family, which was one of the best in that locality — honest, religious and industrious, but poor. ... My father loved young Joseph Smith and often hired him to work with his boys. I was about six years old when he first came to our home. I remember going into the field on an afternoon to play in the corn rows while my

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33 John Updike, *Collected Poems, 1953–1993* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 20–21.

brothers worked. When evening came, I was too tired to walk home and cried because my brothers refused to carry me. Joseph lifted me to his shoulder, and with his arm thrown across my feet to steady me, and my arm about his neck, he carried me to our home.

I remember the excitement stirred up among some of the people over Joseph's First Vision, and of hearing my father contend that it was only the sweet dream of a pure minded boy. One of our church leaders came to my father to remonstrate against his allowing such close friendship between his family and the "Smith Boy," as he called him. My father defended his own position by saying that Joseph was the best help he had ever found. ...

Not until Joseph had had a second vision and begun to write a book which drew many of the best and brightest people of the churches away did my parents come to a realization of the fact that their friend, the churchman, had told them the truth. Then, my family cut off their friendship for all the Smiths, for *all* the family followed Joseph. Even the father, intelligent man that he was, could not discern the evil he was helping to promote.

My parents then lent all the aid they could in helping to crush Joseph Smith; but it was too late. He had run his course too long. He could not be put down.

There was never a truer, purer, nobler boy than Joseph Smith, before he was led away by superstition.<sup>34</sup>

Those of us who believe in Joseph's divine calling don't, of course, grant that he was "led away by superstition." We

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34 Cited in Hyrum L. Andrus and Helen Mae Andrus, eds., *They Knew the Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1974), 1–2.



might think, though, that those who abandon his claims for a metaphorical Book of Mormon — a stance that makes an ambiguous hash not only of the book itself but of the claimed appearances of the presumably fictional Nephite prophet Moroni in the nineteenth century — are choosing a different religion than that taught by the prophet and apostles and embraced by the Saints. And that's to say nothing about those who, going still further, want us to jettison our belief in the bodily resurrection of Christ and to affirm only that Jesus is “now living in God's future,” that he is knowable, today, “as ultimacy in the historicity of the everyday.”

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