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Shaken Faith Syndrome and the Case for Faith

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SHAKEN FAITH SYNDROME AND THE CASE FOR FAITH

Stephen O. Smoot

Abstract: Michael R. Ash is a Mormon apologist who has written two thoughtful books and a number of insightful articles exploring a wide range of controversial issues within Mormonism. His recent book Shaken Faith Syndrome: Strengthening One's Testimony in the Face of Criticism and Doubt is an outstanding apologetic resource for individuals searching for faith-promoting answers that directly confront anti-Mormon allegations and criticisms. Ash does an excellent job in both succinctly explaining many of the criticisms leveled against The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and articulating compelling answers to these criticisms.

Review of Michael R. Ash. *Shaken Faith Syndrome: Strengthening One's Testimony in the Face of Criticism and Doubt*. Redding, CA: Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research, 2008. x + 301 pp., with index. \$19.95 (paperback).

“Wherefore Didst Thou Doubt?”

(Matthew 14:31)

A favorite scripture of Latter-day Saint scholars is Doctrine and Covenants 88:118: “And as all have not faith, seek ye diligently and teach one another words of wisdom; yea, seek ye out of the best books words of wisdom; seek learning, even by study and also by faith.” While it is usually the last phrase (“seek

learning, even by study and also by faith”) of this scripture that resonates with LDS scholars, the first part of this passage is equally profound. As “all have not faith,” or, one might say, have had their faith challenged or shaken, we are to teach each other words of wisdom from the best books. This scripture is a mandate to bolster each other’s faith as much as it is an invitation to pursue truth.

Additional scriptures from the Doctrine and Covenants invite Latter-day Saints to engage with the Gospel intellectually as well as spiritually. “Seek not for riches but for wisdom,” admonishes D&C 6:7. “Study and learn and become acquainted with all good books, and with languages, tongues and people,” we are instructed in D&C 90:15. “Obtain a knowledge of history, and of countries, and of kingdoms, of laws of God and man,” dictates D&C 93:53. The Latter-day Saints, accordingly, have long been keen students of history and cultures. As Elder Marlin K. Jensen, the previous Church Historian and Recorder, summarized:

Several latter-day revelations speak to the subject of church history. In them the Lord clearly says He wants “a record kept” (D&C 21:1), and the record is to be kept “continually” (D&C 47:3). The record is to include “all things that transpire in Zion” (D&C 85:1) and is to chronicle the “manner of life” and the faith and works of the Latter-day Saints (D&C 85:2). It is to be written “for the good of the church, and for the rising generations that shall grow up on the land of Zion” (D&C 69:8). Those who keep the record—provided they are faithful—are promised “it shall be given [them] . . . by the Comforter, to write these things” (D&C 47:4).¹

1. Marlin K. Jensen, “Making a Case for Church History,” in *Preserving the History of the Latter-day Saints*, ed. Richard E. Turley and Steven C. Harper (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2010), 4.

The need to buttress faith in the restored Gospel through study and prayer is necessitated by a sustained history of both sectarian and secular attacks on LDS beliefs and practices. Those bent on destroying the faith of the Saints, or at least trying to morph their faith into something totally alien to the foundational tenets of Mormonism, have long been engaged in a crusade against Mormonism from both the pulpit and the press. Others have been subtler in their subterfuge, and have, like wolves in sheep's clothing (Matthew 7:15), attempted to undermine the faith of the Saints "from within."² Their goal has been, and remains, to prove that the ground and content of LDS faith is untenable, outrageous, or even a dangerous deception.³ The goal of these critics is frequently to convince Church members to totally abandon Mormonism, or to radically remold Mormonism into a meaningless pastiche of moral relativism and benign atheism that denies the existence of God, divine nature and Atonement of Christ, and the historicity of the

2. Andreas Ross, writing for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, perceived this tactic being used by a popular contemporary commentator on Mormonism. See Andreas Ross, "Alltag der Mormonen in Utah," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, at <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/ausland/alltag-der-mormonen-in-utah-fuer-alle-ewigkeit-11775372.html>. The pertinent quote reads: "Der ehemalige Microsoft-Berater Dehlin hat seinen Job in Seattle aufgegeben, um Zeit für seine zweite, seine selbstgegebene Mission zu haben: die Kirche Jesu Christi der Heiligen der Letzten Tage mit ihren Widersprüchen zu konfrontieren. Von innen."

3. For some important chronicles on both past and contemporary anti-Mormonism, see J. Spencer Fluhman, "A *Peculiar People*": *Anti-Mormonism and the Making of Religion in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina, 2012); Terryl Givens, *The Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myths, and the Construction of Heresy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Craig L. Foster, *Penny Tracts and Polemics: A Critical Analysis of Anti-Mormon Pamphleteering in Great Britain, 1837-1860* (Salt Lake City: Kofford, 2002); Patrick Mason, *The Mormon Menace: Violence and Anti-Mormonism in the Postbellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Massimo Introvigne, "The Devil Makers: Evangelical Fundamentalist Anti-Mormonism," *Dialogue* 27/1 (Spring 1994): 165-81; Louis Midgley, "The Signature Books Saga," *FARMS Review* 16/1 (2004): 361-406.

founding claims of Joseph Smith, including the First Vision, the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, and the restoration of priesthood.

Even before the Book of Mormon came off the press, critics of Joseph Smith's "Gold Bible" scoffed at any claims of authenticity, and it was only a short time after the founding of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints that enemies began to vilify, mock, and otherwise denounce Joseph Smith's revelations as the vilest of frauds.⁴ The entire affair surrounding Joseph Smith's account of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon seemed like nothing more than another sad example of religious fanaticism and imposition duping a credulous populace.⁵

The response to these attacks has led to a vigorous tradition of apologetics within the Church of Jesus Christ—although, as Richard Bushman has rightly observed, "proponents of the Book of Mormon face an uphill battle in resisting this onslaught" of critical arguments.⁶ In the early to mid-nineteenth century, such luminaries as Oliver Cowdery,⁷ Parley P. and Orson Pratt,⁸ and President John Taylor⁹ all took up the

4. Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 80–83, 85, 88–94. As Bushman shows, some of Joseph Smith's earliest enemies were not even below breaking the law to hinder or prevent the publication of the Book of Mormon.

5. See Fluhman, "A Peculiar People," 21–77.

6. Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, 92.

7. See John W. Welch, "Oliver Cowdery's 1385 Response to Alexander Campbell's 1831 'Delusions,'" in *Oliver Cowdery: Scribe, Elder, Witness*, ed. John W. Welch and Larry E. Morris (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2006), 221–39.

8. Peter Crawley, "Parley P. Pratt: Father of Mormon Pamphleteering," *Dialogue* 15/3 (Autumn 1982): 15–28; David J. Whittaker, "Orson Pratt: Prolific Pamphleteer," *Dialogue* (Autumn 1982): 29–43; E. Robert Paul, "Early Mormon Intellectuals: Parley P. and Orson Pratt, a Response," *Dialogue* (Autumn 1982): 44–50.

9. James Williams, "Defending Plural Marriage to Vice President Colfax," in *John Taylor: Champion of Liberty*, ed. Mary Jane Woodger (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2009), 219–31.

pen in defense of the faith. At the turn of the century, Elder B. H. Roberts,¹⁰ Elder John A. Widtsoe,¹¹ and others offered responses to increasingly sophisticated attacks. And from the mid-twentieth century to the present, Hugh Nibley and other scholars have written extensively in response to contemporary assaults on the faith of the Saints.¹²

With the recent advent of easy access to the Internet, criticisms of the Church of Jesus Christ have been made widely available—though most remain retreads of the same tired, well-worn attacks that often date to the 1830s. So ubiquitous are these frequently half-baked and regurgitated criticisms, that in 2008 Elder M. Russell Ballard of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles counseled the Saints to be more involved on-line to correct misinformation about the Church.¹³ In response to Elder Ballard's counsel, and to combat this tidal wave of anti-Mormon websites, blogs, and message boards, numerous amateur LDS apologists have begun to defend the faith on the web. "Internet apologetics," as one might call it, has opened up a new realm of action that resembles something akin to the American "Wild West" of popular Hollywood depiction. Without the control of publication standards or peer review, and with the ability to hide in anonymity behind a computer screen, posters on blogs and message boards can get away with saying pretty much anything they please without repercussion, no matter how false, scurrilous, detestable, or putrid the claim may be.

10. B. H. Roberts, *New Witnesses for God*, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1895–1909); B. H. Roberts, *In Defense of the Faith and the Saints*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1907–1912).

11. John A. Widtsoe, *Evidences and Reconciliations*, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1943–1951). Although published between 1943 and 1951, much of the material discussed by Elder Widtsoe in these volumes comes from earlier writings published in church periodicals and correspondences.

12. Hugh Nibley, *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley*, 19 vols. (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1986–2011).

13. M. Russell Ballard, "Sharing the Gospel Using the Internet", *Ensign*, July 2008, 58–63.

On one particularly unpleasant message board dedicated to allowing apostates and critics to rant against the Church unfettered, breathtaking examples of (often highly vulgar) personal character assaults against LDS Church leaders and members can frequently be seen with nauseating consistency. While some Internet websites do foster civil and engaging discussion of Mormonism, many more seem to exist only to function as nothing more than intellectual gutter-holes.

Shaken Faith Syndrome: An Overview

Michael R. Ash has taken to heart the directive given in D&C 88:118. His passion for clarifying, expounding, and defending the restored gospel has produced two thoughtful books,¹⁴ besides numerous articles both online and in print.¹⁵ Ash typifies Hugh Nibley's "amateur" who, despite no formal academic degrees, has nevertheless offered respectable and substantive contributions to the current discussion.¹⁶ With an impressive knowledge of the controversies being debated within Mormonism and a keen ability to distill complex issues into manageable discussions, Ash is a valuable asset to the Mormon community.

One of Ash's more recent offerings is the book *Shaken Faith Syndrome: Strengthening One's Testimony in the Face of Criticism and Doubt*. Published in 2008 by the Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research (FAIR), this book, according to the back cover, attempts to explain how Latter-day Saints "can be both critical thinkers and devout believers." This book is overtly

14. Michael R. Ash, *Of Faith and Reason: 80 Evidences Supporting the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Springville, UT: Cedar Fort, 2008); *Shaken Faith Syndrome: Strengthening One's Testimony in the Face of Criticism and Doubt* (Redding, CA: Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research, 2008).

15. For my own review of one of Ash's previous works, as well as a brief overview of his other contributions to Mormon apologetics, see Stephen O. Smoot, "The Faith and Reason of Michael R. Ash," *FARMS Review* 21/2 (2009): 225–37.

16. Hugh Nibley, "The Day of the Amateur," *New Era* (January 1971): 42–44.

apologetic in nature. But why is another book such as this necessary? In the foreword to *Shaken Faith Syndrome*, Ash explains that current anti-Mormon arguments, especially those found on the Internet, have led him to write with the hope that he can (1) give readers unaware of LDS apologetic material an overview and summary of this valuable information; (2) introduce readers to the controversial material typically brought up by critics from a faithful perspective, thus “inoculating” them against hostile efforts to use such issues against them; and (3) strengthen the faith of Church members (vii–x).

The book is divided into two parts, “Misplaced Testimony and Anti-Mormon Vulnerability” (1–108) and “Responses to Specific Anti-Mormon Claims” (109–251). A list of sources for further study is given at the end of each chapter in part 2. Endnotes are provided (256–96), followed by an index (297–301). Overall, the type, layout, and format of the book are aesthetically pleasing, although the use of endnotes instead of footnotes is disappointing.

Part 1: Doubt, Cognitive Dissonance, and Paradigms

Part 1 of *Shaken Faith Syndrome* is devoted to establishing the methodology that Ash will use to address specific topics in part 2. Ash’s examples of real people who have voiced their concerns, thoughts, and opinions on message boards and in other venues are commendable. Many of these narratives are eye opening, taken directly from ex-Mormon message boards that paint a vivid picture of what can happen to those who lose confidence in the Church.

Ash explores important subjects such as the nature of paradigms, cognitive dissonance, and coping with doubt. He notes that shaken faith may result from unrealistic expectations of prophets or science (or both), and he goes on to describe the danger of “fundamentalist, dogmatic, or closed-minded ideologies about certain facets of the gospel or early LDS historical

events” that can make believers “more likely to apostatize when they encounter challenging issues” (3; emphasis removed). An engaging chapter also responds to the common accusations leveled against Mormon scholars associated with the Maxwell Institute (83–102).

Most appropriately, the first chapter of *Shaken Faith Syndrome* (3–10) details how to handle doubt, with reference to the theory of cognitive dissonance. Ash explains that cognitive dissonance is “a psychological phenomenon that describes the discomfort felt when confronted with conflicting items of equally weighted information” (5).¹⁷ In chapter 2 (11–17) Ash insightfully demonstrates that ex-Mormons also suffer from cognitive dissonance when confronted with faith-affirming information. Contrary to the façade fabricated by self-assured and insulated critics, cognitive dissonance is a two-edged sword that cuts both ways. No human can, or should, be free from its effects—it is part of how we learn, grow, and assimilate new information.

The two chapters of *Shaken Faith Syndrome* that many Latter-day Saints may find the most difficult to grasp are chapter 3 (“Unrealistic Expectations of Prophets,” 19–30) and chapter 4 (“Confusing Tradition with Doctrine,” 31–34). In these two chapters Ash admonishes his LDS readers not to set prophets on a pedestal of perfection and inerrancy nor to confuse folk traditions (even popular traditions) with established doctrine. Doing so, according to Ash, can lead to dissonance when one discovers the unsurprising (but to some still shocking) reality that prophets are human beings too, and that at times they have

17. The theory of cognitive dissonance was first developed by social psychologist Leon Festinger, who used the case study of a failed prophecy within a UFO religion to formulate his theory. See Leon Festinger, Henry Riecken, and Stanley Schachter, *When Prophecy Fails: A Social and Psychological Study of a Modern Group That Predicted the Destruction of the World* (New York: Harper-Torchbooks, 1956). Until recently it has been the standard theory in social psychology.

offered speculation or personal opinion on various matters or have not always been in full agreement with each other. Some members of the Church assume (if only implicitly and unconsciously) that every single word spoken by a prophet or an apostle constitutes a divine special revelation or official Church doctrine. Elder D. Todd Christofferson of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles recently disapproved of this mentality during his address given at the 182nd Annual General Conference of the Church:

At the same time it should be remembered that not every statement made by a Church leader, past or present, necessarily constitutes doctrine. It is commonly understood in the Church that a statement made by one leader on a single occasion often represents a personal, though well-considered, opinion, not meant to be official or binding for the whole Church. The Prophet Joseph Smith taught that “a prophet [is] a prophet only when he [is] acting as such.”¹⁸

Or, if asked further, these members would agree that prophets are certainly not inerrant—and yet would still be extraordinarily troubled if any example of error came to their attention. This tendency, as documented by Ash, has led members to question their testimonies when confronted with information that contradicts their false assumptions. The prophets do not claim infallibility, but some members unwittingly act as if that is the case and are then disturbed if the prophets do not measure up to that unrealistic standard.

Likewise, Ash warns against confusing tradition with established doctrine. An example is how Latter-day Saints have viewed the geography of the Book of Mormon in the past. He notes: “It was the traditional view of a hemispheric geography,

18. D. Todd Christofferson, “The Doctrine of Christ,” *Ensign*, May 2012, 88.

however, that was passed from generation to generation of Latter-day Saints as an unarguable truth. This ‘truth’ was spoken from the pulpit, integrated into manuals, taught in classes, and casually implied as LDS doctrine for nearly two hundred years among most Church members” (32). But even though a hemispheric model of the geography of the Book of Mormon has been taught in the past, it has never been official doctrine. Those who conclude that it is may experience cognitive dissonance and the accompanying negative effects on their faith.¹⁹

Chapters 7, 8, and 9 were perhaps my favorite in part 1 of *Shaken Faith Syndrome*. Chapter 7 (“Betrayal and Church ‘Cover-Up,’” 71–75) addresses the common complaint that the church has undertaken to cover up damning or controversial aspects of Mormon history. In tackling this claim, Ash explains that the Church has actually been remarkably transparent in publishing controversial aspects of its history. “As we examine other challenging issues in LDS publications we find that many, if not all, of the [controversial] issues have been noted, examined, or discussed by believing LDS historians in a variety of LDS-targeted publications, conferences, and programs” (74). Official church publications such as the *Ensign* and the *Improvement Era*, and quasi-official publications such as *BYU Studies* and the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, have explored many controversial topics.²⁰ Ash himself provides a list of “examples of issues tackled by these official publications” (74), which should serve as solid evidence that the Church is not censoring its history. Although it could be argued that the Church could do more to foster a better cultural environment

19. For more on the history of different geographical theories of the Book of Mormon, see Matthew Roper, “Limited Geography and the Book of Mormon: Historical Antecedents and Early Interpretations,” *FARMS Review* 16/2 (2004): 225–75.

20. See “Mormonism and history/Censorship and revision/Hiding the facts,” at http://en.fairmormon.org/Mormonism_and_history/Censorship_and_revision/Hiding_the_facts.

where Church members feel more safe asking about controversial issues, this is a far cry from the constant refrain of critics that the Church is deliberately suppressing its history.

Chapters 8 and 9 focus on the work done by scholars associated with the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship (formerly FARMS). Ash provides something of an overview of this work in chapter 8 (“Adding Cognitions [Beliefs],” 77–82) and counters arguments against the quality of work done by the Maxwell Institute in chapter 9 (“Anti-Mormon Disdain for LDS Scholarship and Apologetics,” 83–102). The most common arguments put forth by critics that are answered by Ash include the following:

- LDS scholars are not real scholars (84–91).
- LDS apologists engage in ad hominem (91–93).
- LDS scholars are too biased to be objective (93–94).
- LDS scholars are really just paid apologists (94–95).
- FARMS articles are not peer-reviewed (95–97).
- Non-LDS scholars reject the arguments of FARMS and other LDS apologists (97–100).
- LDS scholars have changed, and are continuing to change, the Church and Church doctrine (100–102).

Ash ably answers these accusations, which, unfortunately, are routinely advanced by critics of Mormonism.

Part 2: Specific Responses to Anti-Mormon Arguments

Part 2 of *Shaken Faith Syndrome* is dedicated to answering specific criticisms of the Book of Abraham, the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith, LDS Church history, and LDS doctrine. Just a few of the subjects discussed by Ash in part 2 of *Shaken Faith Syndrome* include the Book of Abraham and the Joseph Smith Papyri (113–28); Book of Mormon geography, archaeology, anachronisms, and historicity (129–200); the Kinderhook Plates (209–14), plural marriage (215–28); and the First Vision (237–43). As noted earlier, in part 2 Ash does not

offer any new contributions to the arguments already put forth by LDS scholars. Rather, he provides a handy summary and overview of these issues with some of his own commentary added in.

The Book of Abraham and the Joseph Smith Papyri

Some Latter-day Saints with weakened faith cite the controversy surrounding the Book of Abraham and the Joseph Smith Papyri as a significant contributing factor. After all, the arguments against the Book of Abraham often create the impression that it is established beyond any reasonable doubt that the book is a patent fraud.²¹ The evidence for Joseph Smith's deception, the critics claim, is so straightforward that nobody would be able to honestly continue to believe in the Book of Abraham after seeing the truth of the matter. However, there is much that has been said in favor of the Book of Abraham's authenticity, and the controversy is by no means settled.²² Latter-

21. The most recent book-length attack on the Book of Abraham is found in Robert K. Ritner, *The Joseph Smith Egyptian Papyri: A Complete Edition* (Salt Lake City: Smith-Pettit Foundation, 2012). Besides the supplemental essays, and Ritner's own translation of the copies of the Book of the Dead found amongst the Joseph Smith Papyri, much of the material found in this volume is an updated expansion on Ritner's earlier polemical work on the Book of Abraham. See Robert K. Ritner, "The Breathing Permit Of Hôr Among the Joseph Smith Papyri," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 62/3 (2003): 161-180. For a review of Ritner's earlier problematic work, see Larry E. Morris, "The Book of Abraham: Ask the Right Questions and Keep on Looking," *FARMS Review* 16/2 (2004): 355-80; Kerry Muhlestein, "The Book of Breathings in Its Place," *FARMS Review* 17/2 (2005): 471-486. Another popular attack piece on the Book of Abraham is Charles M. Larson, *By His Own Hand Upon Papyrus: A New Look at the Joseph Smith Papyri* (Grand Rapids, MI: Institute for Religious Research, 1992). For two reviews of this work, see John Gee, "A Tragedy of Errors," *FARMS Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 4/1 (1992): 93-119; and Michael D. Rhodes, "The Book of Abraham: Divinely Inspired Scripture," *FARMS Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 4/1 (1992): 120-26.

22. Four recent offerings from John Gee, Kerry Muhlestein, and Kevin Barney demonstrate that, despite the *ex cathedra* pronouncements of some recent critics, the discussion around the Book of Abraham is still very much alive, and defenders of the book have not backed down from offering examples of

day Saint scholars have devoted much effort to defending the Book of Abraham. To insist that the matter has been effectively put to rest because, for example, a few scraps of the Joseph Smith Papyri surfaced in 1967 is a gross oversimplification.²³

Ash's discussion of the controversy surrounding the Book of Abraham and the Joseph Smith Papyri primarily utilizes the research of John Gee, who is perhaps the foremost expert on the subject.²⁴ Ash also references work done by Michael D. Rhodes, Brian M. Hauglid, and Hugh Nibley (128, 281–83). Ash's material in *Shaken Faith Syndrome on the Book of Abraham* is very close to his work done elsewhere on this subject.²⁵ Considering how complex the issues surrounding the Book of Abraham and the Joseph Smith Papyri are, Ash does a fine job of bringing

evidence of its ancient authenticity. See Kevin Barney, "On Elkenah as Canaanite El," *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 19/1 (2010): 22–35; John Gee, "An Egyptian View of Abraham," in *Bountiful Harvest: Essays in Honor of S. Kent Brown*, ed. Andrew C. Skinner, D. Morgan Davis, and Carl Griffin (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2011), 137–56; John Gee and Kerry Muhlestein, "An Egyptian Context for the Sacrifice of Abraham," *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 20/2 (2011): 70–77; John Gee, "Formulas and Faith," *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scriptures* 21/1 (2012): 60–65. For my own overview of this new research, see "The Book of Abraham and Continuing Scholarship: Ask the Right Questions and Keep Looking," at <http://www.fairblog.org/2012/08/21/the-book-of-abraham-and-continuing-scholarship-ask-the-right-questions-and-keep-looking/>.

23. My somewhat haphazard bibliography of apologetic material on the Book of Abraham is available online, see "'A Most Remarkable Book': Supplementary Reading" at <http://www.fairblog.org/2011/10/07/a-most-remarkable-book-supplementary-reading/>.

24. Much of Gee's research can be accessed online at <http://maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/authors/?authorID=24>.

25. Michael R. Ash and Kevin Barney, "The ABCs of the Book of Abraham," at http://www.fairlds.org/FAIR_Conferences/2004-Michael-Ash-and-Kevin-Barney.pdf; and Ash, "Book of Abraham 201: Papyri, Revelation, and Modern Egyptology," at http://www.fairlds.org/FAIR_Conferences/2006_Book_of_Abraham_201.html.

together the work of LDS scholars into a manageable chapter that should be comprehensible to most lay readers.²⁶

Book of Mormon Geography and Archaeology

In his discussion of the issues surrounding the historicity of the Book of Mormon, Ash follows the geographical model proposed by John L. Sorenson. This model, sometimes known as the Limited Geography Theory, posits that the events described in the Book of Mormon occurred primarily in southern Mexico and northern Guatemala.²⁷ Although competing theories exist, including those that place Book of Mormon events around the Great Lakes or in Peru in South America or elsewhere, it seems to me that Sorenson's model has the strongest backing from textual details in the Book of Mormon and physical evidence from archaeological investigation.²⁸ At the very least, the use of this geographical model; (1) demonstrates

26. Recently Ash has appeared alongside Gee, Rhodes, and other LDS scholars in a DVD produced by FAIR discussing the Book of Abraham controversy from a faithful perspective. Much of the material presented by Ash in *Shaken Faith Syndrome* overlaps with his remarks on the DVD. See Tyler Livingston and J. D. Judlander, *A Most Remarkable Book: Evidence for the Divine Authenticity of the Book of Abraham* (Redding, CA: Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research, 2011). Of special note are two very recent articles on the Book of Abraham controversy by LDS Egyptologist Kerry M. Muhlestein and LDS scholar Brian M. Hauglid. See Kerry M. Muhlestein, "Egyptian Papyri and the Book of Abraham: A Faithful, Egyptological Point of View," in *No Weapon Shall Prosper: New Light on Sensitive Issues*, ed. Robert L. Millet (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2011), 217–43; and Brian M. Hauglid, "Thoughts on the Book of Abraham," in Millet, *No Weapon Shall Prosper*, 244–58.

27. John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1985); Sorenson, "Viva Zapato! Hurray for the Shoe!," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 6/1 (1994): 297–361; Sorenson, *Images of Ancient America: Visualizing Book of Mormon Life* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1997); Sorenson, *Mormon's Map* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2000).

28. At about the time of the publication of *Shaken Faith Syndrome*, Brant Gardner offered a monumental commentary on the Book of Mormon that converges on many points with the scholarship of Sorenson: Brant Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Kofford, 2007). Gardner's commentary is essential reading for those wishing to remain current on Book of Mormon scholarship.

that a hemispheric model is not the only viable option; and (2) introduces members new to the subject to an alternative view that they may not yet have encountered.

Besides giving an overview of the geography of the Book of Mormon, Ash gives detailed reviews of criticisms of the Book of Mormon including, but not limited to, alleged anachronisms (131–42), textual changes (149–56),²⁹ DNA (157–62),³⁰ and the allegedly questionable nature of the witnesses of the Book of Mormon (193–200).³¹

The Kinderhook Plates

The so-called Kinderhook Plates have often been touted by critics of Mormonism as evidence of Joseph Smith's deceptiveness or ineptitude as a translator. The Kinderhook Plates were a set of small, bell-shaped brass plates that were reportedly unearthed in Kinderhook, Illinois, in April 1843. The following month, the plates were brought to Joseph Smith, who, according to William Clayton, attempted a translation.³² Later, in 1879, one of the eyewitnesses to the "recovery" of the plates, named Wilbur Fugate, confessed that the entire scheme was a joke perpetuated to lampoon the credulity of the Mormons.

29. Unquestionably the foremost authority on this subject is Royal Skousen, who has produced an exhaustive commentary on this subject. See Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon*, 6 vols. (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004–2009).

30. See *The Book of Mormon and DNA Research*, ed. Daniel C. Peterson (Provo, UT: Maxwell Institute, 2008); Ugo A. Perego, "The Book of Mormon and the Origin of Native Americans from a Maternally Inherited DNA Standpoint," in Millet, *No Weapon Shall Prosper*, 171–216.

31. On the testimony of the witnesses of the Book of Mormon, see Richard L. Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981); Richard L. Anderson, "Attempts to Redefine the Experience of the Eight Witnesses," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 14/1 (2005): 18–31; Steven C. Harper, "Evaluating the Book of Mormon Witnesses," *Religious Educator* 11/2 (2010): 37–49; Gale Yancey Anderson, "Eleven Witnesses Behold the Plates," *The Journal of Mormon History* 38/2 (Spring 2012): 145–62.

32. *An Intimate Chronicle: The Journals of William Clayton*, ed. George D. Smith (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1995), 100.

When in the early 1980s the plates were determined to be a forgery,³³ critics of Joseph Smith quickly used this as evidence of the Prophet's duplicity. Jerald and Sandra Tanner pronounced that

it is obvious that Joseph Smith fell for the bait, hook, line, and sinker. Since Joseph Smith did not know the difference between ancient and modern brass plates, as the evidence clearly shows, and was oblivious to the fact that the hieroglyphics were forged, we cannot have any confidence in his work. While the Mormon leaders are supposed to have special powers of discernment, Joseph Smith certainly did not demonstrate a capability to discern when he was being tricked.³⁴

However, careful research by Ash and others leads to a different conclusion: the historical evidence is not as cut-and-dried as the Tanners would like us to think. Although it is tempting to jump to conclusions from a surface-deep analysis of the evidence, further investigation sheds more light on this perplexing episode. As Ash explains: "It seems, instead, that after some initial excitement and interest in the plates, the matter was simply forgotten or dropped. It is logical and reasonable to surmise that the reason we don't have a translation of the Kinderhook Plates is because no translation ever took place. If it had, the pranksters would have crowed about duping the prophet immediately and not waited to discuss their scheme years or decades later (214)."³⁵

33. Stanley B. Kimball, "Kinderhook Plates Brought to Joseph Smith Appear to Be a Nineteenth-Century Hoax," *Ensign*, August 1981, 66–74.

34. Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Answering Mormon Scholars: A Response to Criticism Raised by Mormon Defenders* (Salt Lake City: Utah Lighthouse Ministry, 1996), 2:123.

35. A similar conclusion to Ash's has also been reached by Brian M. Hauglid, "Did Joseph Smith Translate the Kinderhook Plates?" in Millet, *No Weapon Shall Prosper*, 93–103. See also Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone*

Plural Marriage

The practice of plural marriage by early Latter-day Saints has been a point of heated controversy. So outraged were nineteenth-century Americans at this practice that the federal government enacted legislation (of highly questionable constitutionality) aimed at obliterating the Church as an institution solely for its acceptance of this practice. Today many people, both within and outside the Church, are understandably troubled by the history of Mormon polygamy. Ash discusses many criticisms such as Joseph Smith was a sexual predator because he married young women, Joseph Smith and other early Mormons were liars in denying that they practiced plural marriage, and sexual relations within polygamous marriages are indicative of Joseph Smith's lecherous nature.³⁶

Besides responding to various criticisms of plural marriage, Ash speculates on the purpose of polygamy:

Plural marriage, I believe, was the earthly restoration and manifestation of the key to this eternal unity—a unity that we can't completely appreciate until we arrive in the celestial kingdom and become fully one with God. In polygamous relationships (also known as

Rolling, 489–90: "Joseph seemed to be stepping into the trap, but then he pulled back. . . . After the first meeting, no further mention was made of translation, and the Kinderhook Plates dropped out of sight. Joseph may not have detected fraud, but he did not swing into a full-fledged translation as he had with the Egyptian scrolls. The trap did not spring shut, which foiled the conspirators' original plan."

36. These and other topics are addressed in an excellent recent volume: *The Persistence of Polygamy: Joseph Smith and the Origins of Mormon Polygamy*, ed. Newell G. Bringhurst and Craig L. Foster (Independence, MO: John Whitmer Books, 2010). Brian C. Hales has also very recently offered a thorough look at Joseph Smith's practice of plural marriage, and besides offering many helpful insights into the historical and doctrinal context of early Mormon plural marriage, has also challenged many of the negative conclusions reached by previous hostile authors. See Brian C. Hales, "Joseph Smith's Personal Polygamy," *The Journal of Mormon History* 38/2 (Spring 2012): 163–228.

“Celestial Marriage”)—sealed by the binding powers of the priesthood—we get a glimpse of that heavenly family unit being practiced in mortality. In this limited earthly practice we primarily see the aggregation of multiple women to one man, but evidence suggests that Joseph foresaw more than this and practiced limited sealings that crossed marital bounds. In an at-onement with God we can appreciate the need for all potentially divine beings to be sealed together (p. 226).

The First Vision

Throughout his life Joseph Smith either wrote or dictated a number of different accounts of his 1820 theophany. The earliest recorded account dates to 1832, the latest to 1842. Besides Joseph Smith’s firsthand testimony concerning the First Vision, a number of secondhand accounts are also extant.³⁷ Because of alleged discrepancies or contradictions between these accounts, Joseph Smith’s detractors often make the following allegation, with various manifestations: “The conflicts and contradictions brought to light by the preceding historical evidence demonstrate that the First Vision story, as presented by the Mormon church today, must be regarded as the invention of Joseph Smith’s highly imaginative mind. The historical facts and Joseph’s own words discredit it.”³⁸

With the First Vision lying at the heart of Mormonism,³⁹ this is indeed a crucial and sensitive subject. It has long been

37. See Dean C. Jessee, “The Earliest Documented Accounts of Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” in *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestation, 1820–1844*, ed. John W. Welch and Eric B. Carlson (Provo, UT: BYU Press and Deseret Book, 2005), 1–33.

38. Wesley P. Walters, “New Light on Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” accessed 15 November 2011, <http://www.irr.org/mit//first-vision.html>.

39. Gordon B. Hinckley, “The Marvelous Foundation of Our Faith,” *Ensign* (November 2002): 80. “It [the first vision] either occurred or it did not occur. If it did not, then this work is a fraud. If it did, then it is the most important and wonderful work under the heavens.”

debated. If doubt can be thrown upon the veracity of Joseph's initial revelation, this would cast a long and dark shadow over the rest of his prophetic career. Accordingly, critics have been relentless in attempting to undermine the validity of the First Vision. Notwithstanding, Latter-day Saints have not been silent in their defense of Joseph Smith.⁴⁰ Nor has Ash, who rebuts criticisms of supposed chronological inconsistencies and problematic content in the differing accounts and includes a chart showing the harmony among those accounts (243). Ash provides this cautionary note to sectarian critics of Joseph Smith who, in their zeal to discredit the Prophet, employ a double standard:

Many of the criticisms leveled against Joseph Smith's vision apply equally well to Paul's vision. For instance the critics attack Joseph Smith because the earliest known record of his vision wasn't given until a dozen years after it happened. The first record of Paul's vision, however, which is found in 1 Corinthians 9:1, wasn't recorded until two dozen years after it happened. And just as the most detailed description of Joseph's vision

40. For a sampling of the LDS response to criticisms of the first vision, see the following: Richard L. Anderson, "Circumstantial Confirmation of the First Vision Through Reminiscences," *BYU Studies* 9/3 (1969): 373–404; Milton V. Backman, *Joseph Smith's First Vision: Confirming Evidences and Contemporary Accounts* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980); Hugh Nibley, "Censoring the Joseph Smith Story," in *Tinkling Cymbals and Sounding Brass*, ed. David J. Whittaker (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1991), 53–96; James B. Allen and John W. Welch, "The Appearance of the Father and the Son to Joseph Smith in 1820," in *Opening the Heavens*, 35–75; Matthew B. Brown, *A Pillar of Light: The History and Message of the First Vision* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Book, 2009); Steven C. Harper, "A Seeker's Guide to the Historical Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision," in *The Religious Educator* 12/1 (2011): 165–76; Samuel Alonzo Dodge and Steven C. Harper, ed., *Exploring the First Vision* (Provo: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2012); Steven C. Harper, "Evaluating Three Arguments Against Joseph Smith's First Vision," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 2 (2012): 18–32, at <http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/evaluating-three-arguments-against-joseph-smiths-first-vision/>.

was one of his later accounts, so likewise, Paul's most detailed account of his vision was the last of several recorded. The details in both accounts are expanded because they are geared to different audiences. (242)⁴¹

As Ash demonstrates in this chapter, contrary to what Walters and other critics allege, the differing accounts of the vision "actually harmonize very well" (242) and together provide a fuller glimpse of this remarkable event.

Reservations and Critiques

Although I greatly enjoyed *Shaken Faith Syndrome*, there are a few aspects of the book that I found lacking. First, Ash uses a lot of Internet citations from message boards and other websites with long URLs that are either no longer active or difficult to access, making source-checking and further reading inconvenient. Second, some significant issues are either untouched by Ash or inadequately covered. These include the pre-1978 priesthood ban, the Church's stance on same-sex marriage, and the charge of institutionalized sexism within the Church. Of course, it is unreasonable to expect every single argument that has been raised against the Church to be covered in a single work, but in my judgment these three issues are raised often enough by detractors to have justified a response.

Finally, some aspects of Ash's book are now outdated, having been superseded by more recent and robust scholarship. Since the publication of *Shaken Faith Syndrome* in 2008, newer research has outdone some of Ash's own analysis.

41. Ash provides a citation to Richard Lloyd Anderson, "Parallel Prophets: Paul and Joseph Smith," *Ensign*, April 1985, 12–13. Anderson keenly perceives parallels between the "first visions" of Paul and Joseph Smith, and he deftly counters the questionable arguments of sectarian critics. For a parallel analysis of the first visions of Paul and Joseph Smith, see John A. Tvedtnes, "Variants in the Stories of the First Vision of Joseph Smith and the Apostle Paul," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 2 (2012): 73–86, at <http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/journal/volume-2-2012/>.

Conclusion

In the 1990s a popular television show called *The X-Files* made famous the catchphrase “The truth is out there.” This is the main theme raised repeatedly by Ash throughout *Shaken Faith Syndrome* (especially 103–6). Sound answers to anti-Mormon criticisms are available. Those who are confronted with criticisms of Mormonism need not be overwhelmed by what may appear at first glance to be sophisticated attacks. The reality is that most criticisms leveled against Joseph Smith and his revelations rest on dubious allegations, rank fallacies, specious reasoning, or unwarranted assumptions. That is not to say there are no valid criticisms, for some controversies raised by the claims of Mormonism are, from an intellectual point of view, still debatable. In a few instances, fully satisfactory answers remain elusive.

Contrary to the caricature perpetuated by antagonists of the Church, Latter-day Saints have not planted their heads in the sand or thrown their hands in the air and sighed with resignation. There is yet a manifest spirit of apologetic fervor within the ranks of the Church of Jesus Christ, and there is no sign of that spirit abating anytime soon. As long as detractors continue to bring forth their strong reasons against the restored church, learned believers will be there to refute them (D&C 71:7–10).⁴²

Despite its few shortcomings, *Shaken Faith Syndrome* is an excellent book. I highly recommend it for those who struggle with doubt or uncertainty stemming from weakened faith or a lack of knowledge regarding the issues that impinge on their faith. I also recommend it as a helpful resource to share with friends or loved ones in and out of the Church who merely have questions about the aforementioned criticisms of Mormonism. Ash should be commended for his ability to frame complex

42. See Daniel C. Peterson, “An Unapologetic Apology for Apologetics,” *FARMS Review* 22/2 (2010): ix–xlviii.

issues and to engage in fruitful discussion and analysis of the salient facts pertaining to the controversies he explores. Although *Shaken Faith Syndrome* does not offer much new to the discussion, it does an admirable job of dispelling misconceptions and modeling a faithful approach to dealing with LDS-critical arguments. Its scope and depth of coverage make a compelling case for faith that stands to greatly benefit those experiencing any degree of shaken faith syndrome.

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