

A REPLY FROM A FORMER CES EMPLOYEE

FOREWORD

As a freshman at the University of Southern California, I was first exposed to what is commonly referred to as “anti-Mormon literature.” I read “The Godmakers” from cover to cover, which described a church with a history and doctrines far darker and more sinister than the relatively dull one in which I had spent the entirety of my life. I also ended up listening to a “Christian” radio station which broadcast the rantings of one Walter Martin, who had made a living as an “expert” on “cults” and the “occult,” a world in which Mormons supposedly play a starring role. In reviewing the work of these people who had made tearing down my faith their mission, I found myself feeling frustrated, frightened, and powerless – frustrated because I knew that a good chunk of what they were saying was flat-out wrong, frightened because I wasn’t sure if the stuff they claimed that I didn’t recognize was actually true, and powerless because I was in no position to offer any substantive rebuttal.

I returned to Salt Lake over Christmas break and, out of the blue, was given a copy of “The Truth About ‘The Godmakers,’” a book by a man named Gilbert Scharffs that took “The Godmakers” and refuted every charge in it, line by line, with ample documentation. ([You can now read the whole book online – no charge.](#)) I later met Mr. Scharffs after I returned home from my missionary service in Scotland, and I thanked him for his thoughtful reply. What struck me, beyond the saliency of his arguments, was the patient, Christlike tone with which he wrote. Where “The Godmakers” had been inflammatory and insulting, Scharffs had been reasonable and kind, with no attempt to attack or defame his supposed enemies personally.

That is the tone I will try to emulate as I reply, line by line, to Jeremy Runnells’ magnum anti-Mormon opus, “Letter to a CES Director.”

Runnells’ letter has become the new gold standard for those taking issue with the Church. Dissidents like John Dehlin and blogs like MormonThink and ZelphontheShelf (a great, great title, by the way – well done, Zelf!) frequently quote from it as the authoritative source for orthodox ex-Mormon positions. It’s quite different in tone from “The Godmakers” and my old pal Walter, who were making the case that Mormonism is a Satanic cult, whereas Jeremy is making a more intellectual case that the Church is little more than a clumsy, obvious, and occasionally well-intended fraud. So while Walter Martin wanted to tear down my Mormon faith to make me a Christian, Jeremy Runnells just wants to tear down my Mormon faith and leave me comfortless in the theological rubble. It’s a far bleaker worldview than the one “The Godmakers” was peddling, and it’s also, I think, a far more devastating assault on the LDS faith. As I wander in and out of various Facebook groups and blog discussions, I become astonished at how far-reaching the influence of the CES Letter really is. While I was preparing this reply, I received word that one of my cousins has lost her faith as a result of it. Indeed, so many attribute Runnells’ arguments as the catalyst for their loss of faith that it begs for a substantive and faithful reply.

Runnells insists that he still hasn’t received one from the CES director to whom his magnum opus was addressed. I’m no CES Director, but I did teach early morning seminary for three years in Westwood, California, in the meetinghouse right behind the Los Angeles Temple. They actually paid me to do it, more or less making me a CES employee, although my “salary” was only \$599 per year. Another dollar and I would have had to declare it on my income tax. (As it was, they labeled the check as “reimbursement for expenses,” but, just to be safe, I still paid tithing on it.) This probably means I was more of a CES contractor than a CES employee, but I prefer the title as it is, even if it contains error.

That way, my fallibility will not be in question.

There have been a few other attempts to respond, most notably from FairMormon, which Runnells dismisses as a group of “unofficial apologists.” I take from this that only a direct response from the Quorum of the Twelve or the First Presidency would satisfy Runnells as an “official apologist” response, and it is unlikely that any such response will come through official channels. Certainly this response is deeply unofficial – I’m the ward Webelos leader, which is the limited extent of my current ecclesiastical authority. So nothing I write here should be interpreted as anything but the extremely fallible opinion of a rank-and-file church member. One wonders, then, why I would bother to write it at all.

To answer that, I would cite the Gilbert Scharffs example, recognizing that he was actually a CES Director, and so his response might rise to the level of a more official response. Regardless of his credentials, I will be forever grateful to Brother Scharffs for offering solid answers to an ignorant college freshman who was looking for them when the “Godmakers” authors were eager to destroy my faith. I doubt anything I write here will have any impact on the opinion of Jeremy Runnells – he seems to have pretty well made up his mind on this stuff – but if there is a single kid, or adult, who reads this and feels a little less frustrated, frightened, or powerless, then writing this will be worth it.

I also recognize that there is often little value in being “anti-anti,” as it usually generates more heat than light, and the exchanges are seldom, if ever, accompanied by the presence of the Holy Spirit. The Book of Mormon quotes Jesus as saying that “he that hath the spirit of contention is not of me, but is of the devil, who is the father of contention, and he stirreth up the hearts of men to contend with anger, one with another. Behold, this is not my doctrine, to stir up the hearts of men with anger, one against another; but this is my doctrine, that such things should be done away.” (See 3 Nephi 11:29-30)

I’m sad to report that I’ve had my share of contentions on subjects like these, and I have no desire to deliberately reproduce that experience here on anywhere else. I also don’t want this to be interpreted as a personal indictment of Jeremy Runnells. He is a man I have never met and a man I am in no position to judge. I don’t think it’s helpful to demonize those who doubt, or even those who leave. So many members seem eager to boot out the people who don’t seem to fit. They cite the parable of the wheat and the tares as they smugly and self-righteously pat themselves on the back for being on the wheat side of the equation. Who would take comfort in the loss of another’s faith? Who would watch those struggling and rejoice that the Lord is purging His church of the faithless rather than reach out to them in charity and love?

This calls to mind the story of the Rameumptom in the Book of Mormon, which tells of a group of people who would stand on a massive elevated platform and rejoice that the Lord “hast elected us that we shall be saved, whilst all around us are elected to be cast by thy wrath down to hell.” (Alma 31:17)

I find it deeply depressing that some seem to delight in the spiritual misery of others. As Latter-day Saints and disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ, we can, and should, do far better than that, even when confronting those who think we’re not worthy of the Lord we claim to represent. I will therefore attempt to rise to a level of charity, honesty, and compassion in my response, and I will probably, at times, fail miserably. In fact, I probably already have. That’s a good thing, as it really takes the pressure off going forward. I also intend to keep things as light and playful as possible, as I don’t see any reason to treat this thing like a funeral. Just because we’re dealing with issues of eternal salvation, damnation, and eternal lakes of fire and brimstone, there’s no reason we can’t have a little fun.

So, some ground rules – Jeremy’s words will be reproduced here in forest green, the color of life. My responses will be in black, the color of darkness. In addition, much of the info I will put into my response has already been on my blog in one form or another. I will therefore be cutting, pasting, and freely plagiarizing myself without giving myself proper attribution. (In fact, I’ve done it several times already in this foreword, and you probably didn’t even notice!) It saves me the time of rewriting what I’ve already written on a number of these subjects, and I’m nothing if not lazy.

With that inspirational background out of the way, on with the reply!



“If we have the truth, it cannot be harmed by investigation. If we have not the truth, it ought to be harmed.”

President J. Reuben Clark



“The most important decision you can make right now is what you stand for, Danny. Goodness...or badness.”

Judge Elihu Smails, *Caddyshack*

Introduction

[Name of CES Director Removed],

Thank you for responding to my grandfather's request to answer my concerns and questions and for offering your time with me. I appreciate it.

Well, as is probably clear by this point, I've never met you or your grandfather, and I'm not the CES Director who's name you've had removed. (Wonder who that guy is. Has he come forward? Is he in some kind of witness protection program? Is he hiding in the John Taylor bunker in the Logan Temple?) I recognize I'm quite presumptuous of me to step into a conversation to which I was not invited, but that's the kind of guy I am. I thank you for your kind words which I'm pretending are intended for me, even as I recognize that you may not appreciate my response after I'm finished.

I'm interested in your thoughts and answers as I have been unable to find official answers from the Church for most of these issues. I'm hoping you're going to have better answers than many of the ones given by unofficial apologists such as FAIR and Neal A. Maxwell Institute (formerly FARMS).

And right here, I want to stop you and challenge some questionable assumptions right at the outset. You label both FAIR and the Maxwell Institute as "unofficial apologists." This is a charge you repeat several times on your website and in your initial letter. The designation seems appropriate for FAIR, which is an independent organization with no official connection to the Church other than the membership of its researchers, but the Maxwell Institute is funded by BYU, a Church-owned school. Doesn't that give them any cache of officialdom? Surely if the official church thought what the Maxwell Institute were saying were nonsense, they'd pull the plug. Are there only 15 "official apologists" whose office gives them the necessary credibility to respond to your questions? Do the Seventies count? Or the General Relief Society Presidency? I know they don't have the priesthood, but I do think it's cool that women say prayers in General Conference now. I'd like to see more movement in that direction, but we'll get to that point soon enough.

The basic problem here is a fallacious appeal to authority in an attempt to poison the well of anything that FAIR or FARMS may say because it lacks some kind of Mormon Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval. Their arguments, like your arguments, ought to be evaluated solely on their merits rather on the credentials of those making them. Remember, they may be unofficial apologists, but you're an unofficial critic, too. (If you are official, I'm going to need to see some paperwork and two forms of ID.)

I'm just going to be straightforward and blunt in sharing my concerns. Obviously I'm a disaffected member who lost his testimony so it's no secret which side I'm on at the moment. All this information is a result of over a year of intense research and an absolute rabid obsession with Joseph Smith and Church history.

Fine by me. I've had my shots.

With this said, I'd be pretty arrogant and ignorant to say that I have all the information and that you don't have answers. Like you, I put my pants on one leg at a time and I see through a glass darkly.

Well, that's nice to know. Perhaps I shouldn't tell you that as I'm writing this, I'm not even wearing pants. So if you're watching me, that dark glass would really come in handy.

You may have new information and/or a new perspective that I may not have heard or considered before. This is why I'm genuinely interested in what your answers and thoughts are to these troubling

problems.

I probably don't have any new information or/nor a new perspective, which means that you're likely to hear a number of things you've both heard and considered before, many of which come from those unofficial, disqualified sources you previously mentioned. But by the same token, having already read ahead, nothing you've written is anything I hadn't heard or considered before. Yet somehow, the same information that drove you out of the Church has not damaged, and in many cases has even strengthened, my own personal faith.

That shouldn't come as a surprise to either of us. In the age of the Internet, it's rather foolish to presume that the church has any capacity to hide any aspect of its practices or history from the world at large, so it always amazes me when people who are disaffected with the church, as they fixate on something that church does or did that they don't like, act like they've uncovered something nobody else has ever discovered.

This was the case when I had a telephone conversation with a man named Mike Norton, a guy who, by his own admission, has twelve fake temple recommends that he uses to sneak in to temples to film the endowment ceremony and post it on YouTube. He was very friendly at the outset, and he remained friendly even as he launched into a 45-minute diatribe against the church, all of which was stuff that I'd heard before and have talked about on my blog beyond the point of endurance.

Did I know all about the seedy elements of Joseph Smith's polygamy? Well, [yes](#). What about the Kinderhook Plates? Yeah, haven't written about them, but [they're no big deal](#). What about the lack of external evidence for the Book of Mormon? Well, [I think there's quite a bit more evidence, both internal and external, than enemies of the church will admit](#). Didn't get a chance to say any of that, though – he tore through his spiel under the assumption that I'd never heard such things, and I just listened as he recited them as he has likely done dozens, if not hundreds, of times before. The oddest complaint he had, the only one which I have not, in fact, heard from anyone else, was that Gordon B. Hinckley wasn't a prophet because he didn't act like Moses coming down from Sinai when he went on Larry King's CNN show. I had seen that interview, and I found him pleasant and inspiring, but maybe he should have parted some large body of water or something.

So, to sum up, nothing here is going to be particularly new to either of us. But perhaps it might be helpful to someone else.

I've decided to lay down just about all the major concerns that I have. I went through my notes from my past year of research and compiled them together. It doesn't make sense for me to just lay down 5 concerns while I also have 20 other legitimate concerns that are keeping me from believing the truth claims of the LDS Church.

Lay away.

A quick background might be helpful as to where I'm coming from. I was a very active and fully believing member my entire life up until around the summer of 2012. My grandpa already outlined my life events to you in his email so I think you get the idea that I accepted and embraced Mormonism.

Again, I don't know your grandpa, but I take you at your word. I'll even assume you always had 100% home teaching and that you paid tithing on your gross income and not your net.

In February of 2012, I was reading the news online when I came across the following news article: Mormonism Besieged by the Modern Age. In the article was information about a Q&A meeting at Utah State University that LDS Church Historian and General Authority, Elder Marlin K. Jensen gave in late 2011. He was asked his thoughts regarding the effects of Google on membership and people who are "leaving in droves" over Church history.

Elder Marlin K. Jensen's response:

"Maybe since Kirtland, we've never had a period of – I'll call it apostasy, like we're having now; largely over these issues..."

This truly shocked me. I didn't understand what was going on or why people would leave "over history."

That quote from Elder Jensen has infamously made him the most quoted General Authority on anti-Mormon sites and has been the source of much mischief, especially since it's usually cited by people who claim that Elder Jensen himself made the claim that people were "leaving in droves." To cite one example, John Dehlin's website StayLDS.org links to the article with the following description of Elder Jensen's remarks:

This year, Elder Marlin Jensen, the [Mormon Church](#)'s outgoing official historian, [acknowledged that members are defecting](#) from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints "in droves" and that the pace is increasing.

The problem is that Elder Jensen said no such thing. The "leaving in droves" premise came from the questioner, not Elder Jensen. Perhaps Elder Jensen should have corrected the questioner in his answer – i.e. "I don't think it's accurate to say people are 'leaving in droves,' buddy. And just how much is a 'drove,' anyway?" - but I'm betting he didn't realize that he would be attributed with the designation of droves from then to forevermore. It's also dishonest to say, as Dehlin's site does, that Jensen claimed "the pace [of drove leavers] is increasing." He said no such thing. He's later clarified his statement by saying "To say we are experiencing some Titanic-like wave of apostasy is inaccurate." That statement would appear to contradict both the droves and the increasing pace, but it's a statement that's generally given short shrift when critics cite Jensen as proof of the Church's implosion.

To your credit, you make the proper attribution of droves to the questioner and not to the General Authority, but since so many others do not, I thought this issue bears mentioning here. It's also worth reading all of Elder Jensen's answer, which, in context, described the great lengths to which the church is now going in order to provide greater access to historical information. You can read the full answer here at this [unofficial apologetic website](#).

I started doing research and reading books like LDS historian and scholar Richard Bushman's [Rough Stone Rolling](#) and many others to try to better understand what was happening.

And good for you! I adore *Rough Stone Rolling* and heartily recommend it to all readers, both LDS and not. A terrific read, thoroughly researched, and one that vastly increased my testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith.

The following issues are among my main concerns:

All right, strap yourselves in, folks – incoming droves of stuff coming at us...

1. What are 1769 King James Version edition [errors](#) doing in the Book of Mormon? An ancient text? Errors which are unique to the 1769 edition that Joseph Smith owned?

It's amazing to me that this objection is the first on your list, as typically people lead with their strongest argument. I would expect you to come out of the gate with something like polygamy or LDS racism or other things that I, too, find genuinely troubling in many respects. Instead, we begin with consideration of "errors" in a 1769 King James Bible.

But even that requires us to define terms and question assumptions. When you say "errors," for instance, what kind of errors are we talking about? Is this a version of the Bible that claims that the first people on earth really were Adam and Steve? Or that Monty Python's Brian of Nazareth is the true messiah? Or that cannibalism doesn't deserve the bad rap that it gets?

Your link to the supposed errors in question isn't much help in answering that question. Apparently, the errors that have you up in arms are "translation errors." It takes us to a section in a Wikipedia article that states the following:

The King James Bible (1769) contains unique translation errors which also occur in the Book of Mormon, implying that the Book of Mormon used the KJV as a source. A few examples are [2 Nephi 19:1](#), [2 Nephi 21:3](#), and [2 Nephi 16:2](#). The Book of Mormon also references "dragons" and "satyrs" in [2 Nephi 23:21-22](#), matching the KJV, whereas more modern bible translations do not include these mythological beasts.

Clicking on each of the links, which take us to the Book of Mormon scriptural text also posted at Wikipedia, doesn't tell me which parts of the verses are in error. This required me to dig around and do some actual research, which really frosts my biscuits, if you know what I mean.

So let's start with the first one – 2 Nephi 19:1, which, just as reads as follows:

Nevertheless, the dimness shall not be such as was in her vexation, when at first he lightly afflicted the land of Zebulun, and the land of Naphtali, and afterwards did more grievously afflict by the way of the Red Sea beyond Jordan in Galilee of the nations.

See the error? Me neither. So let's keep digging.

In the original 1611 version of the KJV, there are no commas after "Nevertheless" or "Zebulun." It uses the word "afterward" instead of "afterwards." It has the word "her" after the phrase "grievously afflict," and it says "sea" instead of "Red Sea." Also there are commas in the final sentence that are not in the Book of Mormon version.

Again, where are the errors? Is it an error to say "afterwards" and not "afterward?" Certainly both are acceptable. Are we talking about commas? Because inserting commas and using a slight variation of a word doesn't change the meaning of the text at all. Perhaps could be considered more grammatically correct than the other, but I'm not sure which is which. And given that the Book of Mormon text was submitted to the printer with no punctuation whatsoever, one ought to expect a number of variations in comma use based on the printer's choices, and I'm pretty sure E.B. Grandin was not infallible.

At issue, then, seems to be the change from “sea” to “Red Sea,” and perhaps this is, indeed, an error of minor significance. But the problem is that this is an error *unique to the Book of Mormon*.

Here you can read [Isaiah 9:1](#) as it appeared in the 1769 edition “that Joseph Smith owned.” (As a sidenote, your mention of Joseph Smith’s ownership of the 1769 version, a fact you do not document but I’ll take your word for it, implies that it was some kind of aberrant or unusual thing to own that particular version, when, in fact, I assume it was the standard edition of the time. I could be wrong on that, but the fact that Joseph Smith owned it adds little to your argument, especially since I’ve demonstrated that the text of his Isaiah quotes doesn’t match up with that edition as advertised.) The 1769 version says “sea” and not “Red Sea.” In fact, the 1769 says “afterward” and not “afterwards;” it has the “her” after “grievously afflict,” and is far more like the 1611 KJV than the Book of Mormon.

So your first objection leaves me deeply puzzled as to why any of this is a serious problem for you. None of the errors that trouble you are doctrinal or even substantive – for the most part, they’re *grammatical*. And as much as a grammar Nazi as I readily confess to being – ending a sentence with a preposition is an error up with which I will not put – I think grammatical errors are the lowest form of human error possible, just as puns are the lowest form of humor. And jokes about German sausage are the wurst.

From the outset, we cut to the heart of most of your problems with this grammar indictment. Because the vast majority of your objections rely on the premise that error is always a sign that God is absent, because he would never allow his true Church to make even trivial mistakes.

I bumped into this in a backstage conversation with a non-LDS actor in a production of “A Few Good Men” at Pioneer Theatre in Salt Lake City. He asked me how I could support a church where the policy is that “when the prophet has spoken, the thinking has been done.”

I responded by saying that wasn’t the policy, and that I didn’t believe that.

“No, no, I’ve heard that over and over again through the years,” he said. “If that’s not the policy now, then they’ve changed it – which means it wasn’t inspired in the first place.”

So I took to Google, and I found the source for the quote in question. It comes from a 1945 church magazine, wherein the uncredited author states the following in a [Ward Teaching message](#):

When our leaders speak, the thinking has been done. When they propose a plan—it is God’s plan. When they point the way, there is no other which is safe. When they give direction, it should mark the end of controversy. God works in no other way. To think otherwise, without immediate repentance, may cost one his faith, may destroy his testimony, and leave him a stranger to the kingdom of God.

Yikes.

What to make of this? For if this is true, then our leaders who get to think for us must be infallible. But infallibility is at odds with the central doctrine of agency, which ensures that even the prophet has the freedom to make mistakes. To presume, then, that everything our leaders say flows directly from the mind of the Almighty is to suggest that at some point, either agency is extracted from the souls of the church hierarchy, or they achieve perfection in mortality.

Since neither of those is a workable possibility, that statement must be wrong.

Lest you think me faithless in coming to that conclusion, I share the concurring opinion of President George Albert Smith, who was the president of the church at the time this statement appeared in a

church publication. In a letter written to a Unitarian minister criticizing the idea of mindless Mormons, President Smith had this to say:

The leaflet to which you refer, and from which you quote in your letter, was not “prepared” by “one of our leaders.” However, one or more of them inadvertently permitted the paragraph to pass uncensored. By their so doing, not a few members of the Church have been upset in their feelings, and General Authorities have been embarrassed.

I am pleased to assure you that you are right in your attitude that the passage quoted does not express the true position of the Church. Even to imply that members of the Church are not to do their own thinking is grossly to misrepresent the true ideal of the Church... [which] gives to every man his free agency, and admonishes him always to use the reason and good judgment with which God has blessed him.

I shared that with my debating partner, who scoffed at the idea. “Do you get to pick and choose, then? Who gets to decide what’s true and what isn’t?”

We do.

Not only do we *get* to decide, we have the *responsibility* to decide. And God will hold us, not our leaders, accountable for the choices we make.

My debating partner saw this as a cop out. I see it, however, as the central principle of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Let’s cite a practical example. Our leaders have taught us that it is essential that we keep the Sabbath day holy. It’s one of the Ten Commandments; Christ Himself reiterated its importance during His mortal ministry, and modern revelation commands us to do it, too. So how do we go about it?

Well, back in the time of Moses, most of the thinking on the subject was done for you. Specific rules were prescribed that outlined exactly what you could and couldn’t do. By the time Jesus arrived on the scene, the rules had been codified to the point of absurdity – you can take X number of steps on the Sabbath, for instance, and only eat eggs laid on the Sabbath by a “laying hen.” Jesus rejected all that – he “fulfilled” the law, meaning that the principle of the law was still in effect, but you were responsible for how you obeyed it. You keep the Sabbath Day holy, and you justify to God why your choices make that happen.

No leader stands between you and Christ. You, personally, are accountable for every choice you make.

Of course, that’s not just true of you and me. That’s true of Thomas S. Monson, too – and every other prophet who has ever lived. If it were not so, then agency would have no meaning, and the purpose of this life would be thwarted.

All right, that’s a bit of a diversion from your grammar beef, but since so much of what you right is predicated on assumed infallibility, I wanted to clarify here at the outset that recognizing fallibility is essential to properly understanding the Gospel, as well as to adequately respond to your objections to times when infallibility is clearly not operative.

So back to grammar. Why, indeed, would such errors be there?

The Wikipedia article you cite as your source also has a section about a “use of English homophones.” Quoting therefrom:

A few passages in the Book of Mormon appear to use phrases from the King James Bible, but with

certain words changed to English homophones. For example, [3 Nephi 25:2](#) reads, "But unto you that fear my name, shall the Son of Righteousness arise with healing in his wings; and ye shall go forth and grow up as calves in the stall." This is identical to [Malachi 4:2](#), except that the word Son is used in place of Sun. The two words are homophones in English but not similar at all in Hebrew or Egyptian.

While this demonstrates that the Book of Mormon does indeed contain errors, it also undermines the premise of your initial question. When you ask why errors from the 1769 KJV made their way into the Book of Mormon, the Occam's Razor answer is that Joseph or Oliver simply cracked open the copy on the bookshelf and copied the text directly. But these homophones are evidence that the Book of Mormon was produced by the very process that Joseph described, with Joseph reading text aloud and Oliver transcribing what he heard. In this instance, Joseph probably said "Sun" and Oliver wrote "Son," and that was that. (Your favorite "unofficial apologists" at [FAIR](#) describe why this is probably the same reason why the Red Sea makes its erroneous appearance in 2 Nephi 19:1.)

This would constitute a pretty clunky method of plagiarism – why read the text aloud when you can do the 19th Century equivalent of cut and paste? In addition, it's important to note that with your first question, you have demonstrated your own fallibility, as well as that of the good folks who waste time editing Wikipedia articles. Contrary to the source you cite, 1769 KJV errors *didn't* actually make their way into the Book of Mormon, at least in the case of 2 Nephi 19:1. So already, we're off to pretty shaky start.

Your question, though, seems to contain two different concerns. One is why errors specific to Joseph Smith's personal Bible might be reproduced in the B of M, but the other, larger question is why there are any errors in the Book of Mormon at all, grammatical or otherwise.

The Book of Mormon itself provides the definitive answer to the second question on its very first page. "And now, if there are faults they are the mistakes of men; wherefore, condemn not the things of God, that ye may be found spotless at the judgment-seat of Christ." Again, that's on the first page. The *first frickin' page*. It's been on the first page since 1830 when the book was originally published. How can anyone claim that the Book of Mormon ought to be inerrant when the Book of Mormon itself has always announced its errancy on its very first page?

We've beaten this dead horse into the ground, but I want to make this additional point. Your Question #1 consists of 30 words total. Prior to this paragraph, my response is 2,265 words long. This presents a possible explanation for why you may not feel that responses to your letter have been inadequate. After all, it takes seconds to make inflammatory accusations – *Joseph and Oliver just copied the Book of Mormon out of the family Bible!* – and it takes paragraphs, pages, or even books to provide the context that disproves them.

So on to Question #2!

2. When King James translators were translating the KJV Bible between 1604 and 1611, they would occasionally put in their own words into the text to make the English more readable. We know exactly what these words are because they're italicized in the KJV Bible. What are these 17th century italicized words doing in the Book of Mormon? Word for word? What does this say about the Book of Mormon being an ancient record?

The insertions are more than occasional. You see italicized insertions in almost every verse. They're verbs. English uses them; Hebrew does not. Without them, the text isn't "less readable;" it's essentially

unreadable.

You demonstrate a fundamental misunderstanding of how the KJV translation was performed to claim that only the italicized words, which are highlighted as an admission that they have no direct Hebrew antecedent, represent a KJV translator's "own words." Every word in the KJV represents a translator's choice for how to best express the original text's meaning as they understood it. So, really, every single word, italics or no, is a translator "putting in their own words" what they think the original text means. That's why you can have so many different Bible translations that express similar or even identical meaning using widely varied vocabulary. That's also why you can't adequately translate anything of any length just by plopping the original text into a computer program a la Google Translate or BabelFish, which don't recognize idioms and essentially produce stilted gibberish.

This calls for a demonstration. Here's your Question #2, translated into Hebrew via Google Translate:

הם היו שמים מדי פעם במילות שלהם לתוך הטקסט, 1611 ו 1604 בין KJV כאשר מתרגם המלך ג'יימס תרגמו את התנ"ך. מהן KJV כדי להפוך את אנגלית קריאה יותר. אנחנו יודעים בדיוק מה המילים האלה הן בגלל שהם באות נטויות בתנ"ך האלה עושים בספר המורמונים? מילה במילה? מה זה אומר על הספר המורמונים להיות שיא 17- המילים המודגשות המאה ה עתיק?

Pretty impressive, no? Well, no. At least, not after you retranslate it back into English using the same method. Here's what you get:

2. When King James Bible translated the KJV between 1604 and 1611, they were occasionally put their words into the text to make reading more English. We know exactly what those words are in italics because they KJV Bible . What are the italicized words in the 17th century, these are the Book of Mormon? Verbatim? What does this say about the Book of Mormon to be an old record?

Suddenly, your original question transforms into a query about a magical racist book that has the capacity to inject words into other books in order to "make reading more English" in a universe where words in italics are the KJV Bible, except in the 17th Century, when those words are the Book of Mormon. Verbatim.

Translation requires judgment and choices on the part of the translator, and its unlikely that any two translations of any lengths will produce significantly similar, let alone identical, texts.

So when you ask "What does this say about the Book of Mormon being an ancient record?" you're asking the wrong question. This doesn't say anything about whether or not the Book of Mormon is an ancient record. The KJV verbiage is considered by most scholars to be a perfectly adequate representation of the original Isaiah text, so if the same original Isaiah text existed on the Small Plates of Nephi, the version in 2 Nephi would also constitute an acceptable rendition of the original author's intent.

So the better question is the one you ask before your query about B of M antiquity – i.e. why is this KJV language in the Book of Mormon at all? If Joseph Smith's translation were being performed in the same manner as the KJV translation was performed, then Joseph would have the responsibility to clothe the Hebrew concepts in the English language with his own word choices. And, as I noted above, his choices would not be at all likely to be significantly similar, let alone identical, to a 17th Century translator in Jacobean England. So the logical conclusion is the one your question implies – Joseph was

a simple plagiarist.

Except it's not nearly so simple.

Because the fact is that there are oodles of departures from the King James language in the Book of Mormon – 54 percent of the Isaiah verses in the Book of Mormon are at least slightly different from the KJV - and many of them are very difficult to explain if all Joseph was doing was copying from a dusty Bible on the bookshelf. For instance, a bunch of us unofficial apologists make a big deal out of 2 Nephi 12:16, which combines elements from the Septuagint (“upon all the ships of the sea”) and the KJV (“and upon all the ships of Tarshish”) in a way that no other version of Isaiah 2:16 does. Both wouldn't be there if all Joseph were doing was cutting and pasting. It seems like a ridiculous amount of effort for him to research original sources only to come up with this little tidbit for a throwaway clause in an obscure verse, yet it also seems unlikely that he would hit a bullseye like this purely by accident. How did this happen? In fact, if all he was engaged in was simple plagiarism, why are there any departures from the KJV language at all, let alone in more than half the verses?

There is a growing body of really fascinating research to suggest Joseph was engaged in what some refer to as a “tight” translation – that Joseph's job was essentially to read the words as they appeared on his seerstone or whatever else, and that he had only little to no input into word choices the way the KJV translators did. Royal Skousen's [“Critical Text Project”](#) demonstrates that what initially seemed like bad grammar turns out to be consistent examples of Early Modern English, which dates from the the century prior to the KJV translation. Certainly Early Modern English would not have been the idiom Joseph Smith or any other 19th Century author would have used in writing an original work, nor is it an idiom that is present in anything else Joseph Smith wrote over the course of his lifetime. So, again, this would argue for a “tight” translation and the idea that Joseph functioned as sort of a newsreader more than translator in the traditional sense.

In a tight translation, KJV language becomes far less problematic, as it would suggest that this was the language that the Lord gave Joseph Smith to read aloud to Oliver, and so the Lord, not Joseph, is responsible for the similarities between the two texts. For my part, it makes sense to me that the Lord would provide Joseph language with which he, and most of the Bible-reading world, would be comfortably familiar rather than an entirely different translation of the same material.

And again, it's important to note that this material wasn't transcribed by Joseph but by Oliver, and there are plenty of witnesses to the process who insist that Joseph didn't have any manuscript from which to read. There are also errors like the Red Sea and the Son of Righteousness that show that Oliver was receiving the information from Joseph aurally, not copying out of a book. So the idea of simple plagiarism becomes an increasingly problematic proposition.

Back to more of your Question #2, much of which I responded to in Question #1:

The above example, 2 Nephi 19:1, dated in the Book of Mormon to be around 550 BC, quotes nearly verbatim from the 1611 AD translation of Isaiah 9:1 KJV – including the translators' italicized words. Additionally, Joseph qualified the sea as the Red Sea. The problem with this is that (a) Christ quoted Isaiah in Matt. 4:14-15 and did not mention the Red Sea, (b) “Red” sea is not found in any source manuscripts, and (c) the Red Sea is 250 miles away.

Yep. It's a mistake. As its own title page has announced for 175 years, the Book of Mormon contains the “mistakes of men.” As mentioned above, this one looks like it was probably a transcription error on

Oliver's part. It doesn't seem to have any real doctrinal significance, as far as I can tell. And it is certainly not a mistake that would exist if Joseph were copying the passage out of the Bible like a competent plagiarist.

In the above example, the KJV translators added 7 italicized words not found in the source Hebrew manuscripts to its English translation. Why does the Book of Mormon, completed 1,200 years prior, contain the exact identical seven italicized words of 17th century translators?

Again, the italics are irrelevant, as is the age of the original Book of Mormon text. The issue is similarities between two separate translations, not the source material. And, again, the answer that makes sense to me is that Joseph was engaged in a tight translation and that the Lord determined that the KJV English was the most appropriate English expression of Isaiah's ideas.

I don't know what status you give Hugh Nibley – was he an official or unofficial apologist? He was on the BYU payroll, after all. Regardless of what badge he wore, he [clarifies this issue better than I could](#). I will likely be quoting from the good Dr. Nibley repeatedly over the course of this reply, so I thought I'd set his words apart in a different color – I chose red, the color of fire, as Nibley's words are often the crucible in which nonsense goes to die.

And why should anyone quoting the Bible to American readers of 1830 not follow the only version of the Bible known to them?

Actually the Bible passages quoted in the Book of Mormon often differ from the King James Version, but where the latter is correct there is every reason why it should be followed. When Jesus and the Apostles and, for that matter, the Angel Gabriel quote the scriptures in the New Testament, do they recite from some mysterious Urtext? Do they quote the prophets of old in the ultimate original? Do they give their own inspired translations? No, they do not. They quote the Septuagint, a Greek version of the Old Testament prepared in the third century B.C. Why so? Because that happened to be the received standard version of the Bible accepted by the readers of the Greek New Testament. When "holy men of God" quote the scriptures it is always in the received standard version of the people they are addressing.

We do not claim the King James Version of the Septuagint to be the original scriptures—in fact, nobody on earth today knows where the original scriptures are or what they say. Inspired men have in every age have been content to accept the received version of the people among whom they labored, with the Spirit giving correction where correction was necessary.

I'll now let you state your third question in full without interrupting.

3. The Book of Mormon includes mistranslated biblical passages that were later changed in Joseph Smith's translation of the Bible. These Book of Mormon verses should match the inspired JST version instead of the incorrect KJV version that Joseph later fixed. A typical example of the differences between the BOM, the KJV, and the JST:

3 Nephi 13:25-27:

- . 25: ...Therefore I say unto you, take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than meat, and the body than raiment?

- . 26: Behold the fowls of the air, for they sow not, neither do they reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they?
- . 27: Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit unto his stature?

Matthew 6:25-27 (from the King James Version Bible – not the JST):

- . 25: Therefore I say unto you, Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than meat, and the body than raiment?
- . 26: Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they?
- . 27: Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit unto his stature?

The above Sermon on the Mount passages are identical, which is understandable as Christ may have said the same thing to both groups of people in the Old world as well as the New world. Let's look at the JST version of the above identical passages:

Joseph Smith Translation of the same passages in the LDS Bible for Matthew 6:25-27:

- . 25: And, again, I say unto you, Go ye into the world, and care not for the world: for the world will hate you, and will persecute you, and will turn you out of their synagogues.
- . 26: Nevertheless, ye shall go forth from house to house, teaching the people; and I will go before you.
- . 27: And your heavenly Father will provide for you, whatsoever things ye need for food, what ye shall eat; and for raiment, what ye shall wear or put on.

Christ's Sermon on the Mount in the Bible and the Book of Mormon are identical. Joseph Smith corrected the Bible. In doing so, he also corrected the same identical Sermon on the Mount passage in the Book of Mormon. The Book of Mormon is "the most correct book" and was translated a mere decade before the JST. The Book of Mormon was not corrupted over time and did not need correcting. How is it that the Book of Mormon has the incorrect Sermon on the Mount passage and does not match the correct JST version in the first place?

To answer your question, I think we have to define some terms. The first is the idea that the Book of Mormon is "the most correct book." The second is the concept of translation as it specifically relates to the JST. We'll take them both in turn.

The idea of "the most correct book" comes from Joseph Smith's famous statement on the subject, which reads as follows:

I told the brethren that the Book of Mormon was the most correct of any book on earth, and the

keystone of our religion, and a man would get nearer to God by abiding by its precepts, than by any other book.

Fair enough. But what does that mean, exactly?

Throughout your letter, you return to this phrase repeatedly, as if it's somehow a claim of Book of Mormon inerrancy, when, in fact, it's precisely the opposite. If the Book of Mormon is the "most correct" book, that means that all other books, to one extent or another, are less correct, and therefore contain a degree of error. But it also a clear admission that the Book of Mormon itself also contains error. Joseph Smith does not state that the Book of Mormon is "entirely correct," or "always correct," or "the perfectly correct book." He is offering a comparison rather than issuing an ultimatum. If the Bible and other books were only, say, 2% correct, and the Book of Mormon were 3% correct, it would still be "the most correct" under those circumstances, even if 97% of it were incorrect. (I personally don't think the Bible is only 2% correct or that the Book of Mormon is only 3% correct; I'm pushing this to an extreme to illustrate the point.) The comparison highlights the fact that, while no religious texts are perfect, the Book of Mormon is the best of the lot.

It's also necessary to define what Joseph Smith, and those who quote him, actually mean when they say the Book of Mormon is "correct" in any respect - least, most, or otherwise. How comprehensively should we interpret that adjective? Is it more correct than, say, Stephen Hawking's "A Brief History of Time" on the subject of black holes? No, the Book of Mormon doesn't even mention black holes, so Hawking's book is demonstrably more *scientifically* correct than the Book of Mormon. Okay, then is the Book of Mormon the most *grammatically* correct of any book on earth? It clearly isn't, although I don't what book would be. ("Hey, Bob, you really ought to read *Hobos in Love* by Floyd Burgermeister. It's a terrible story, but it's the most grammatically correct of any book on earth.")

In the context of the original statement, it's clear Joseph is talking about the "precepts" that the Book of Mormon teaches and nothing else. In other words, if you're looking to learn godly precepts while you're stranded on a desert island, and you're only allowed to have one book with you, then you ought to choose the Book of Mormon, as it's your best bet for drawing closer to God. Science, grammar, spelling, penmanship – the correctness of any of those elements don't come into play at all. To insist that they do is to push a tortured legalistic interpretation of Joseph Smith's simple statement and distort his intent.

Now let's turn our attention to the Joseph Smith translation of the Bible, which is unlike the KJV translation or most other biblical translations in that it was not the transfer of religious text from language to another. Joseph loosely tossed the word "translation" around to describe a number of different processes, some of which were definitionally similar to what the KJV translators did, but many, indeed perhaps most, of which were not. The production of the JST was performed by a "translation" method that was, by all accounts, not that kind of translation at all.

In "translating" the Bible, Joseph read the English KJV text and then recorded revelations that he received in doing so. Large passages of text from the JST have no extant ancient text from which they were derived, nor did Joseph claim to have those ancient texts in his possession, although he did suggest that many such revelations were representations of ancient texts that had been lost. The most obvious example is the Book of Moses, which was revealed to Joseph during his "translation" of Genesis, despite the fact that, as far as we know, he never saw the original text of the Book of Moses. Joseph would refer to this as a translation and insist that what he had written were indeed the words of Moses, but this process did not require him to read ideas in one language and find the proper words for

them in English, which is what traditional translators do.

So, equipped with these two freshly-defined premises, let's return to your question. You seem concerned that the JST is "correcting" the KJV and the Book of Mormon, a book Joseph described as "the most correct." But there's absolutely no reason to see the JST language as "correcting" anything in the Book of Mormon. The precepts stated in the B of M version of the Sermon on the Mount are still correct precepts. The JST simply offer additional information that supplements rather than corrects the original information, just as the Book of Moses doesn't replace Genesis but, rather, adds to it.

Actually, you could make a case that the JST is "correcting" the KJV, since the KJV version offers a general application for the "take no thought what ye shall eat" principle, while the JST suggests that this was advice specific to the apostles, not the general church membership. But the irony, here, is that this is identical to the precepts put forward Book of Mormon.

In your question, you use an ellipsis when you quote 3 Nephi 13:25, which would lead a casual reader to assume that 3 Nephi 13:25 is identical to Matthew 6:25. It isn't. You left out a very important part.

Here's 3 Nephi 13:25 in full:

And now it came to pass that when Jesus had spoken these words he looked upon the twelve whom he had chosen, and said unto them: Remember the words which I have spoken. For behold, ye are they whom I have chosen to minister unto this people. Therefore I say unto you, take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than meat, and the body than raiment?

So it turns out the Book of Mormon directs this passage to the apostles and not to the church membership at large and therefore departs from the KJV in precisely the same way the JST does, only it does so using different language. Thus the JST isn't correcting the Book of Mormon at all; they're both saying the same thing.

And if you're going to be intellectually consistent, I don't think you can complain that the same ideas are being expressed in different language, when your initial objection to the Book of Mormon is its inclusion of identical language to translate the same ancient text.

Let's move on to number 4:

4. DNA analysis has concluded that Native American Indians do not originate from the Middle East or from Israelites but rather from Asia.

Nonsense. It has "concluded" no such thing. Science rarely, if ever, reaches definitive conclusions. It is always open to new information, some of which it received in 2013 when a [study determined](#) that some Native Americans do, in fact, have Middle Eastern and European DNA. That study in no way proves the authenticity of the Book of Mormon, as the genes in question come from specimens well before Lehi, but it does demonstrate that there is plenty of room for more information. Most scientists, Mormon or non-Mormon, would scoff at the idea that an absence of evidence is proof of anything.

The Church has been remarkably open on this subject and offers [a comprehensive analysis on LDS.org](#). Would you be willing to concede that this essay constitutes the work of "official" apologists?

Why did the Church change the following section of the introduction page in the 2006 edition Book of Mormon shortly after the DNA results were released?

“...the Lamanites, and they are the principal ancestors of the American Indians” to

“...the Lamanites, and they are among the ancestors of the American Indians”

Because the second version is likely more accurate than the first.

If the translated text of the Book of Mormon concedes that it contains errors, surely we shouldn't expect a non-revelatory introduction written well over a century after Joseph Smith's death to be infallible, should we?

Anachronisms: Horses, cattle, oxen, sheep, swine, goats, elephants, wheels, chariots, wheat, silk, steel, and iron did not exist in pre-Columbian America during Book of Mormon times. Why are these things mentioned in the Book of Mormon as being made available in the Americas between 2200 BC - 421 AD?

Once again, you're overstating your case here. It cannot be said conclusively that such things “did not exist,” only that we have no independent record outside the Book of Mormon for their existence. You've probably heard the cliché “absence of evidence is not evidence of absence” too many times to count, but clichés usually become clichés because they're true. If you apply that standard, the Israelites were never enslaved in Egypt, and Attila the Hun never rode a horse, either – no ancient horse bones have been found across the path he used to sweep through Europe, despite the fact that we have written records of his invasion on horseback.

That said, I cannot deny that such things are, indeed, anachronisms, and I find some of the apologetic explanations for them to be more persuasive than others. Critics chuckle at FAIR's attempt to attribute the anachronisms the translator process of “loan-shifting” and say that all the horses were really tapirs, and I don't really blame them. But the most interesting description of loan-shifting comes from Orson Scott Card's genius essay [“The Book of Mormon - Artifact or Artifice?”](#) where he points out that even the best authors can't help but betray the time and place in which they are writing. He had this to say about horses – or the possible absence thereof:

Nobody rides anywhere [in the Book of Mormon.] Think about it. I don't have to explain to you about airplanes when I say I flew here, but I would certainly say that I flew here. People in Joseph Smith's day rode everywhere they could -- either a horse or a wagon. When they took a long journey on foot, they said so, because it was remarkable. But no one in the Book of Mormon rides anywhere. How did Joseph Smith know to keep his made-up Nephites and Lamanites on foot -- and how did he keep himself from ever pointing out the fact?

So whatever the horses were in the Book of Mormon, people didn't ride them. The horses didn't pull anything – even the anachronistic chariots, whatever they were, weren't pulled by horses. Why not? Why would a forger put horses in the Book of Mormon and then not give them any of their modern uses? To me, that makes the arguments favoring a loanshifting explanation seem far less ridiculous.

The other remarkable thing about the anachronisms in the Book of Mormon is that there are actually *less* of them now than there were when it was first published 186 years ago. My father tested the waters of unofficial apologetics when he wrote a book a few years ago titled [Leap of Faith: Confronting the Origins of the Book of Mormon](#) which was published by Deseret Book. I quote from him liberally here,

beginning on page 216:

Picture a ledger sheet with the arguments of believers on the right side and of the critics on the left. Label it 1830.

In 1830, all the external evidence was on the left side of the ledger, in favor of the critics. Writing on metal plates? Ridiculous; an obvious invention. Large cities in America, inhabited by the ancestors of the Indians? Nonsense; the Indians are nomadic tribesmen who live in tents...

Think of the same ledger sheet, labeled 2009. Metal plates with writing on them, hidden in the ground for later generations to find? Joseph was right on that one; move it from the left side of the ledger to the right, as a mark in the book's favor. Big cities among the Indians? Whether they were Nephite cities or not, there were clearly big cities with large populations in Meso-America before Columbus...Add to those items the others we have covered in the previous chapters that have come to light in just the last half century, and it is clear that the passage of time has put a good many new items on the right side of the ledger (in favor of the book) and removed some of the old ones on the left (against it).

Such a trend is significant, because truth is the daughter of time. With most forgeries, the farther you get from its date of production, the clumsier it looks. In the case of the Book of Mormon, the farther we get from the date of its production, the better it looks.

With regard to forgeries, my father's book provides some firsthand accounts of modern frauds that are really fascinating and probably aren't anything you'll read from any other apologist, official or otherwise. He worked for Howard Hughes back when Clifford Irving forged Hughes' supposed "autobiography" and when Melvin Dummar plopped a forged Hughes will onto the front desk of the Church Office Building. Those forgeries were initially persuasive, but the passage of time has made them appear to be obvious frauds. The idea that the Book of Mormon is actually more plausible now than it was almost two centuries ago ought to give pause to anyone who insists that these anachronisms deal a death blow to its claims of authenticity.

6. Archaeology: There is absolutely no archaeological evidence to directly support the Book of Mormon or the Nephites/Lamanites who numbered in the millions.

Nephites/Lamanites "numbered in the millions?" Not according to the Book of Mormon itself, which only describes the Nephites and Lamanites as numbering in the "thousands" and "tens of thousands." True, we do get mention of the battle deaths of "two millions of mighty men, and also their wives and their children" among the Jaredites, who preceded the Lamanites and Nephites in the Americas by thousands of years, and while I don't dismiss the statistic out of hand, I also don't see any reason to believe that this is anything more than Coriantumr's supposition or Moroni's exaggeration as he abridges the Jaredite record. Neither man would have been capable of conducting an accurate body count. I don't think it makes the slightest bit of doctrinal difference if two million is fact or hyperbole. And, to be beat a dead horse, "if there be faults, they are the mistakes of men."

As to the idea that there "is absolutely no archaeological evidence," you call to mind a statement by actor John Malkovich, who said the following:

"I believe in people, I believe in humans, I believe in a car, but I don't believe something I can't have [sic] absolutely no evidence of for millennia. And it's funny — people think analysis or psychiatry is mad, and THEY go to CHURCH..."

I find it very tedious that so many atheists keep claiming there is “absolutely no evidence” of God’s existence, which is false, when what they mean is that there is “absolutely no *proof*” of God’s existence, which is, in fact, true.

Same with that there is “no evidence” that there were actual people called Nephites and Lamanites who lived and died and did stuff. You may have been watching when, over at [a blog called “Enigmatic Mirror,”](#) Mormon scholar William Hamblin was exchanging posts with a non-Mormon academic named Philip Jenkins, who likens belief in the Book of Mormon as a historical, non-fictional document to belief in Bigfoot – who we all know is [Cain, punished to wander the earth swathed in matted, unbleached Donald Trump combover strands for thousands of years until he finally guest stars as Andre the Giant on The Six Million Dollar Man.](#)

I digress.

Jenkins refuses to either read the Book of Mormon or even acknowledge that there is any reason to do so, because there is – you guessed it – “no evidence” that it’s historical. When Hamblin cites evidence and suggests that Jenkins has “tacitly” admitted that at least some evidence exists, Jenkins gets quite huffy.

“At no point have I ever suggested that there is any evidence whatever in support for the historicity or historical value of the Book of Mormon,” Jenkins huffs, huffily. “I have never suggested or stated that tacitly, or openly, and it is wrong to suggest that I have.”

But there is a great deal of evidence of the Book of Mormon’s historicity, much of which I’ve [talked about on my blog](#). What Jenkins is complaining about, like Malkovich, and like you, is the lack of *proof*, not evidence. (Hamblin himself makes the same point in his response to Jenkins.)

Just to cite perhaps the most compelling example, Nahom is archaeological evidence that the Book of Mormon is an ancient record. Is it proof? By no means. But the fact that a verifiable real-world burial site shows up in the precisely the place the B of M said it should be, and that it did so decades after Joseph Smith could have known it was there? That’s not nothing, and it should not be lightly dismissed. Certainly it’s much more than “no evidence.” Critics have explanations for Nahom, of course, just as apologists have explanations for evidence against the Book of Mormon, which also exists. But it’s wrong to say that no proof is the same as no evidence.

After all, if evidence were always proof, then why would we have a criminal justice system? Jury trials involve two opposing advocates using identical evidence to argue for diametrically opposite conclusions. Even the most devoutly religious concede there is no conclusive proof that God exists, but they’ll offer up a great deal of evidence for why they believe he does. But if the intellectually lazy can equate a lack of proof with a lack of evidence, then they can end all arguments before they begin.

Your use of the word “directly” is also a qualifier that ought to be called into question. By stating that there is no archaeological evidence to “directly support” the Book of Mormon, you tacitly admit that there is evidence that could “indirectly support” the Book of Mormon. And what would “direct evidence” look like? A sign saying “Welcome to Zarahemla?” What makes you think that the name “Zarahemla” would be written or pronounced in characters that any modern archaeologist would be able to recognize? Would you prefer graffiti on an ancient American bathroom that says “For a good time, call Zoram, servant of Laban, now traveling with the family of Nephi?” Well over 99% of the names of people and places of ancient Americans are completely lost to us. The fact that there is even any indirect evidence that could be applied to the Book of Mormon is remarkable in and of itself.

If you only accept events that have “direct” archaeological evidence to back them up, you not only have to write off almost all of the Bible, but just about all of the ancient world, most of which left little or no archaeological footprint.

This is one of the reasons why unofficial apologists are coming up with the Limited Geography Model (it happened in Central or South America) and that the real Hill Cumorah is not in Palmyra, New York but is elsewhere and possibly somewhere down there instead. This is in direct contradiction to what Joseph Smith and other prophets have taught.

Even a cursory reading of the Book of Mormon makes it clear that the Hill Cumorah isn't the hill in upstate New York where Joseph got the plates. In Mormon 6:6, Mormon states that he “hid up in the hill Cumorah all the records which had been entrusted to me by the hand of the Lord, *save it were these few plates which I gave unto my son Moroni.*” [Emphasis added.] So the plates Moroni had after the massive bloody battle at Cumorah were specifically not plates that had been buried there. Moroni then spends decades wandering with these plates, presumably getting as far away from Cumorah as possible, and then buries them up for Joseph to find in an area far removed the Cumoran carnage.

You need more than a cursory reading of the Book of Mormon to realize that the hemispheric model for the Book of Mormon, in which most of the prophets, apostles, and members of the church widely believed and many still believe, can't be sustained by the text. But a close reading reveals a consistent geography that could only have taken place over a relatively limited geographical area. The research on this subject is really quite compelling – John Sorenson's [“Mormon's Codex”](#) is an astonishing work of impeccable scholarship that reviews a massive amount of internal and external evidence for the Book of Mormon's authenticity– and it would be quite ignorant to dismiss it out of hand.

Now is it true that most – but not all - prophets, apostles, and members long believed, and many still believe, both in the New York Cumorah and the hemispheric geographic model? Yes. Absolutely. And is it true that in many cases, the new consensus on these issues is “in direct contradiction to what Joseph Smith and other prophets have taught?” It is.

So what?

We keep coming back to infallibility and the lack thereof, and so many of your objections are rooted in the idea that if even apostles make mistakes like this, the church can't be true. That's not just wrong; it's bad doctrine. Mormons ought to realize that agency trumps infallibility every single time. In the absence of direct revelation, speculation fills the gaps. There is no direct revelation about the specific whereabouts of any Book of Mormon location, so Joseph Smith and others were and are perfectly capable of acting in good faith and still reaching incorrect conclusions, which seems to be precisely what they did. Like it or not, that's how agency works. That's mortality. That's life, in and out of the Church.

Never mind that the Church has a visitor's center there in New York and holds annual Hill Cumorah pageants.

And why shouldn't they? Even if it's not the hill where the final Nephite battle took place, it's still the hill where Joseph got the plates, so it's quite significant to Book of Mormon history. The fact that they still call it “Cumorah” is, in my mind, unfortunate as it perpetuates a cultural mistake, but I don't see how it has even the slightest impact on the Book of Mormon's authenticity.

We read about two major war battles that took place at the Hill Cumorah (Ramah to the Jaredites) that numbered in the deaths of at least 2,000,000 people. No bones, hair, chariots, swords, armor, or any other evidence found whatsoever.

None in upstate New York, no, which is not at all surprising, as the Book of Mormon itself makes it crystal clear that that's not where either Cumorah or Ramah actually was.

Compare this to the Roman occupation of Britain and other countries. There are abundant evidences of their presence during the first 400 years AD such as villas, mosaic floors, public baths, armor, weapons, writings, art, pottery and so on. Even the major road systems used today in some of these occupied countries were built by the Romans. Additionally, there is ample evidence of the Mayan and Aztec civilizations as well as a civilization in current day Texas that dates back 15,000 years. Where are the Nephite or Lamanite buildings, roads, armors, swords, pottery, art, etc.?

Where indeed? What would Nephite buildings, roads, armors, swords, pottery, art, etc. look like?

You do realize that the Mayan and Aztec civilizations didn't label themselves as such, right? Those titles represent transliterations of ancient pronunciation and symbols that, back when these civilizations were flourishing, probably bore no resemblance to how we reference them in modern English.

Archaeology is a process of piecing together the history of civilizations from a relative handful of table scraps. What would be the difference, for instance, between a Mayan bowl or a Nephite bowl? What would distinguish a Lamanite brick from an Aztec brick? How many Mayan roads, armors, or swords say "Property of the Mayan" on them? Odds are overwhelming that any cultural impact of a Nephite, Lamanite, or Jaredite civilization would be impossible to verify based on examining ancient artifacts, regardless of how many may have survived.

Latter-day Saint Thomas Stuart Ferguson was BYU's archaeology division (New World Archaeological Funding) founder. NWAFF was financed by the Church. NWAFF and Ferguson were tasked by BYU and the Church in the 1950s and 1960s to find archaeological evidence to support the Book of Mormon. This is what Ferguson wrote after 17 years of trying to dig up evidence for the Book of Mormon:

"...you can't set Book of Mormon geography down anywhere – because it is fictional and will never meet the requirements of the dirt-archaeology. I should say – what is in the ground will never conform to what is in the book."

– Letter dated February 2, 1976

Never heard of Thomas Stuart Ferguson before reading your letter, although I'm sorry he lost his faith. From what I can gather online, [he founded a private organization that BYU later decided to fund](#), and Ferguson's primary role with the NWAFF at that point was fundraising, not analysis or field work. He was a lawyer by trade, not a trained archaeologist, anthropologist, or geologist - an amateur, not an academic - and he's at least as "unofficial" in his criticism as the apologists you so readily deride.

Your argument is pretty weak if he's the best witness you've got.

7. Book of Mormon Geography: Many Book of Mormon names and places are strikingly similar to many local names and places of the region Joseph Smith lived.

No, not really, but we'll get to that later on when you address this point at length.

The following two maps show Book of Mormon geography compared to Joseph Smith's geography:
The first map is the "proposed map," constructed from internal comparisons in the Book of Mormon.

Book of Mormon Geography:



Joseph Smith's Geography
(Northeast United States & Southeast Canada)



The first map is the "proposed map," constructed from internal comparisons in the Book of Mormon.

No, the first map was constructed from comparison with the second map. Or, rather, the first map *is* the second map, only with Book of Mormon names placed in substitution for real-world locations that have similar-sounding names. The problem is that many of the "proposed" first-map Book of Mormon sites directly contradict their actual geographical references in the Book of Mormon, making the first map

pretty much worthless.

For example, there's Jacobsburg down near the southwest corner of the second map. (Everybody wave. Hi, Jacobsburg!) But 3 Nephi 7:12 describes Jacob, a wicked man appointed as the king of a secret combination, as he commands his followers "that they should take their flight into the northernmost part of the land, and there build up unto themselves a kingdom," a kingdom which is identified as Jacobugath in 3 Nephi 9:9. ("And behold, that great city Jacobugath, which was inhabited by the people of king Jacob, have I caused to be burned with fire because of their sins and their wickedness...")

In what universe can the lower southwest be considered the "northernmost part of the land?"

Alma 22:28 describes the land of Lehi-Nephi as being "on the west of the land of Zarahemla, in the borders by the seashore." Yet there's Lehigh County, PA, inconveniently on the eastern, not western, seashore, and not really "on the west" of anything.

Perhaps the most brazen error in Map #1 is the proposed location of "Ramah," which this map equates with a Canadian town using the same name without an H. Ether 15:11 identifies Ramah as the Jaredite name for "Cumorah," a location this map pins in Joseph Smith's hometown of Palmyra. ("Palmyra" sounds very different from "Cumorah," but we'll let it slide for now.) How can Ramah/Cumorah be both in Canada and New York at the same time? And weren't you previously upset about the possibility of two Cumorahs?

Throughout the Book of Mormon we read of such features as "The Narrow Neck of Land" which was a day and a half's journey (roughly 30 miles) separating two great seas. We read much of the Hill Onidah and the Hill Ramah – all place names in the land of Joseph Smith's youth.

We "read much of the Hill Onidah and the Hill Ramah?" Where? Onidah is mentioned three times, and only once as a hill, in two verses totaling 122 words. Ramah gets even shorter shrift – one mention in a single 39-word verse. Combined, all verses referencing the Hill Onidah and the Hill Ramah constitute .006% of the Book of Mormon text, which is not "much" at all. There are ironically more references to the Hill Ramah and the Hill Onidah in your letter than there are in the entire Book of Mormon.

And, incidentally, why does the "land of Joseph Smith's youth" somehow include a remote Canadian village 1,811 miles away from his hometown that [didn't exist at all in 1830 and wasn't named "Rama" until six years after the Book of Mormon was published?](#)

We read in the Book of Mormon of the Land of Desolation named for a warrior named Teancum who helped General Moroni fight in the Land of Desolation. In Smith's era, an Indian Chief named Tecumseh fought and died near the narrow neck of land helping the British in the War of 1812. Today, the city Tecumseh (near the narrow neck of land) is named after him.

Today it is, yes. But not when the Book of Mormon was published. It wasn't named Tecumseh [until 1912.](#)

We see the Book of Mormon city Kishkumen located near an area named, on modern maps, as Kiskiminetas.

On modern maps, yes. But not any map Joseph Smith could have seen. This area wasn't named Kiskiminetas [until a year after the Book of Mormon was published](#). And, as demonstrated above, the supposed Book of Mormon locations in the map you provided are highly speculative and often demonstrably incorrect.

There are more than a dozen Book of Mormon names that are the same as or nearly the same as modern geographical locations.

Wow. "More than a dozen." Out of 337 total proper names in the text, [188 of which are unique to the Book of Mormon](#). And given that you consider things like "Jacobsburg" and "Jacobugath" to be "nearly the same," I'm surprised you could only come up with forced parallels for less than 5% of the names in total.

Still, let's take a look at the "more than a dozen."

Actual Place Names	Book of Mormon Place Names
Alma	Alma, Velley of
Antrim	Antum
Antioch	Ani-Anti
Boaz	Boaz
Hellam	Helam
Jacobsburg	Jacobugath
Jerusalem	Jerusalem
Jordan	Jordan
Kishkiminetas	Kishkumen
Lehigh	Lehi
Mantua	Manti
Moraviantown	Morianton
Oneida	Noah, Land of Onidah
Oneida Castle	Onidah, Hill
Pama	Pamah
Ripple Lake	Ripliancum, Waters of Sdom
Shiloh	Shilom
Sherbrooke	Shurr

Yep, that's more than a dozen, all right. 18, to be precise. Although why do you cite "Oneida" twice? Did Joseph really name the "land" of Onidah after the city and the hill after "Oneida Castle?" And since the Book of Mormon never refers to the "Land of Onidah," why do you get to stick that one in there?

So, really, we're down to 17.

So allow me to reproduce this list with my comments in a third column. (Most of my comments come from information provided by the [unofficial apologists at FAIR you so despise](#), but since the info seems to be accurate on this subject, I see no reason to avoid using it.)

Actual Place Names	Book of Mormon Place Names	Survey Says?
Alma	Alma, Velley of	Bzzzt. Try again. The Valley of Alma was an unincorporated area called Centerville at the time of B of M publication.
Antrim	Antum	Bullseye! Antrim was around in 1830, ripe for the picking for Joseph's plagiarism.
Antioch	Ani-Anti	Bullseye! Although "Antioch" doesn't sound much like "Ani-Anti" to me.
Boaz	Boaz	Hmmm. Boaz is a biblical name. Wouldn't it have been easier for Joseph to find it there?
Hellam	Helam	Bullseye! And a pretty close match, too.
Jacobsburg	Jacobugath	Bzzzt. Try again. Jacobsburg doesn't show up on maps until a year after the Book of Mormon was published.
Jerusalem	Jerusalem	Bzzzt. Try again. This tiny town doesn't show up on maps contemporary to Joseph, and, even today, it's pretty small - just .2 square miles. Plus, you know, there's another more famous Jerusalem that Joseph would likely have heard of.
Jordan	Jordan	Hmmm. Jordan, like Boaz, and like Jerusalem, was a pretty well-known biblical name. It was also a pretty obscure village on only a handful of maps in 1830.
Kishkiminetas [SIC]	Kishkumen	Bzzzt. Try again. Kiskiminetas - no H – got its name after the Book of Mormon was published, as noted above.
Lehigh	Lehi	Bullseye! It's on the wrong place on your B of M map, though. And Lehi is also a biblical name.

Mantua	Manti	Bzzzt. Try again. Mantua Village got its name in 1898 - the year my grandpa was born, but 68 years after the B of M was published.
Moraviantown	Morianton	Hmmm. This wasn't a town in 1830; it was an Indian reservation, which means it was probably overlooked by most maps.
Oneida	Noah, Land of Onidah	Bullseye! Well done. But you can only use it once.
Oneida Castle	Onidah, Hill	Bzzzt. Try again. Only once, I said!
Rama	Ramah	Bzzzt. Try again. As previously noted, this town didn't exist in 1830.
Ripple Lake	Ripliancum, Waters of Sidom	Hmmm. It existed, yes, but it was and is very tiny and obscure and is usually ignored by most modern maps, let alone those in 1830.
Shiloh	Shilom	Bzzzt. Try again. Shilom is only a "Census Designated Place" used for statistical purposes and is not listed on maps.
Sherbrooke	Shurr	Hmmm. The tiny fishing village of Hyatt's Mill was, indeed, officially renamed "Sherbrooke" in 1819, but most people still called it "Hyatt's Mill" until 1832 when the Brits arrived.

So, to sum up, out of the Book of Mormon's 337 total proper names, you cite 17 that you believe were lifted from locales within a 2,000-mile radius of Joseph's home, yet 8 of those names didn't apply to locations in 1830, and Joseph's knowledge of an additional 5 would have been unlikely, leaving 4 geographical names that are similar, but not identical, to Book of Mormon names.

And thus it is that 1.2% of all Book of Mormon names may or may not have been adapted from precisely four place names out of thousands in a geographical area roughly the size of half of the United States, a tenuous correlation at best that still requires you to think "Ani-Anti" is a clear derivative of "Antioch."

This is all just a coincidence?

Pretty much, yeah.

Hill Cumorah:

Off the eastern coast of Mozambique in Africa is an island country called “Comoros.” Prior to its French occupation in 1841, the islands were known by its Arabic name, “Camora.” There is an 1808 map of Africa that refers to the islands as “Camora.”



Camora is near center in the above 1808 Map of Africa

The largest city and capital of Comoros (formerly “Camora”)? Moroni.

Now we’re getting somewhere. This is much more interesting than Jacobugathian weak sauce you’ve offered up until now.

Certainly Moroni and Cumorah are far more central to the Book of Mormon narrative than the tiny Canadian town of Rama that didn’t yet exist but was still somehow part of the “lands of Joseph’s youth.” Furthermore, Moroni (the man) and Cumorah are linked together, as are Moroni (the town) and Comoros (the island.) So the possible correlation here is far stronger and far more noteworthy than the stuff about the hill Onidah that we’ve all heard so much about.

So before I dive into some of the apologetics on this subject which you’ve probably seen ad nauseum anyway, I want to take a step back and hypothetically concede your point. That is to say, I want to imagine for a moment that Joseph found a contemporary reference to Comoros and Moroni and then decided to make one a hill and one a warrior/writer/nomad/angel in a fictional magnum religious opus about ancient Americans.

How does that explain anything about how the Book of Mormon came to be?

So much of your criticism of the Book of Mormon strains at gnats and swallows camels. Even if Joseph had lifted all these names, or carelessly copied biblical mistakes, or faked having a bunch of plates and spectacles, there’s still the issue of the Book of Mormon itself.

It’s here. It exists. It had to come from somewhere.

A handful of plagiarized names and a sampling of Isaiah excerpts aren’t nearly enough to account for more than 265,000 words of an intergenerational and internally consistent thousand-year history that has endured over a century of scrutiny and still confounds critics and defies easy explanation. You pick two names off a map, and you still have 264,998 words to go.

Elder Jeffrey R. Holland said it better than I could:

If anyone is foolish enough or misled enough to reject 531 pages of a heretofore unknown text teeming with literary and Semitic complexity without honestly attempting to account for the origin of those

pages—especially without accounting for their powerful witness of Jesus Christ and the profound spiritual impact that witness has had on what is now tens of millions of readers—if that is the case, then such a person, elect or otherwise, has been deceived; and if he or she leaves this Church, it must be done by crawling over or under or around the Book of Mormon to make that exit.

But all right, fine. Comoros and Moroni. You asked, so let's see if we can find some answers together.

Maybe those answers are in Lamanai, Belize.

What? A city in central America named Lamanai? Certainly some Mormon named it relatively recently. Wait, no - the non-Mormon [Journal of Field Archaeology](#) says "Lamanai is in fact one of the very few Maya sites for which the ancient name is recorded." So Lamanai is an ancient name? Like Laman? Lamanite? Or King Lamoni? The name of an ancient king passed down for centuries...

Gasp! Surely this proves that the Book of Mormon is true!

If your eyes aren't rolling yet, they should be. This, of course, proves nothing whatsoever. But those who think Comoros and Moroni are solid evidence that Joseph is a fraud are also likely to dismiss Lamanai without a second thought. The fact is that language is weird, and similar stuff shows up in very odd places. Jeff Lindsay, the unofficial apologist guy I linked to above who discovered the non-Mormon Lamanai reference, also recalls meeting Italians with the surname "Moroni." Why would Italians should share the same name as the capital of a small African island? No good answer for that other than coincidence.

As for Comoros, you're likely well aware that back then, Moroni was a tiny settlement that [wasn't on maps in 1830](#) and didn't become the capital of Comoros until 1876. So even though this coincidence is far more striking than the vague similarities between Sherbrooke and Shurr, there's really no way that Joseph would have known about Moroni the village at the time he was engaged in the history of Moroni the warrior/writer/nomad/angel. He could have known about Comoros if he was digging through obscure African maps in libraries far removed from Palmyra, but, really, that's highly unlikely. What would be the point? Especially if he's so lazy as to lift 1.2% of the names from the "lands of his youth" within a 2,000 mile radius. And if he was combing African maps to mine Book of Mormon names, why did he choose only Comoros and no other African geography? His critics are giving him far too much credit.

I offer up an additional theory that may or may not be helpful. Doubters won't be impressed, but believers don't necessarily have to chalk up the name of the village of Moroni solely to coincidence. According to the [infallible Wikipedia](#), the village was "founded by Arabic settlers, possibly during the 10th century." Any chance that Arabic and reformed Egyptian have some vocabulary in common? Why not? In addition, Comoros was settled by a [large Polynesian contingent](#), too, and many leaders have taught that the Polynesians have ancestral connections to the Book of Mormon. (Not trying to open a can of worms here – those leaders are not infallible, and [BYU has conceded](#) that there's no scientific proof of this.) My point is that the evolution of language is a strange and wonderful thing, and it's certainly possible that the Nephite name "Moroni" could very well have wormed its way into international lexicons and landing in a tiny island in Africa.

Or not. This isn't anything more than a fun tidbit to think about.

“Camora” and settlement “Moroni” were common names in pirate and treasure hunting stories involving Captain William Kidd (a pirate and treasure hunter) which many 19th century New Englanders – especially treasure hunters – were familiar with.

No, they weren't. If they were, those like Grant Palmer and others who lean heavily on the Captain Kidd theory for Moroni and Cumorah's origins would be able to provide actual references from such stories to back this up, particularly if they were “common names,” which, given the miniscule 1830 size of the Moroni settlement, they clearly were not. Near as I can tell, no such citations exist. (You certainly don't provide any.) And if these really were common names in popular stories, then why do none of Joseph's legion of critics notice supposedly obvious Kidd/Cumorah/Moroni connection during Joseph's lifetime? Why do we have to wait until Grant Palmer comes along in the 21st Century before anyone notices it at all?

In his letters, Kidd himself makes reference to the nearby islands of Madagascar, Johanna, and Mahala, but says nothing of Camora or Moroni. The best that Palmer can do to tie these names to Kidd and then to Joseph is to point out that Kidd operated [“in the vicinity”](#) of these two places, because Kidd makes no direct mention of them. Making the leap from being “in the vicinity” of locations Kidd never mentions to a presumption that the unmentioned locales constituted “common names” in stories about Kidd strains credulity to the breaking point. If Kidd's exploits truly were the linguistic inspiration for the place the plates were buried, we'd be much more likely to be reading about the Hill Mahala than the Hill Cumorah.

Another thought – if we are to presume that Moroni in the Book of Mormon was inspired by the exploits of a glamorous pirate like Captain Kidd, then why is Moroni as un-Kidd-like a figure as it is possible to be? Where's Moroni's ship? Where's his merry band of fellow brigands? Where are all his death-defying scrapes, dashing romances, and fantastical adventures? Moroni is a gloomy loner who wanders the empty landscape for decades without any companions at all and no enemies to face. He's a great prophet, sure, but he makes for a pretty lousy pirate story.

In fact, the uniform spelling for Hill Cumorah in the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon is spelled as “Camorah.”

Which, just to nitpick, is different from “Camora,” which is the spelling of the location on the map you provide.

Pomeroy Tucker was born in Palmyra, New York in 1802, three years before Joseph Smith. He is considered to be a contemporary source. This is what he said about Joseph Smith:

"Joseph ... had learned to read comprehensively ... [reading] works of fiction and records of criminality, such for instance as would be classed with the 'dime novels' of the present day. The stories of Stephen Burroughs and Captain Kidd, and the like, presented the highest charms for his expanding mental perceptions."

[– Mormonism: Its Origin, Rise, and Progress, p.17](#)

You feel it necessary to point out that Tucker was born in Palmyra three years before Joseph Smith, but you neglect to mention that “Mormonism: Its Origin, Rise, and Progress” was published in 1867, twenty-three years after the prophet's death and roughly fifty years after Joseph was allegedly poring through “works of fiction and records of criminality” with special emphasis on the stories of Burroughs

and Kidd. I'm left to wonder how many people from my own childhood about whom I could confidently describe their reading habits with any degree of specificity half a century after the fact.

This would be a challenge for me if I were asked to provide such information about my closest friends, let alone someone like Tucker, who makes it clear that he had nothing but contempt for Joseph. (More on that later.) There's no plausible reason for Tucker to take such a keen interest in Joseph's early reading habits.

And, of course, Tucker's opinion on this subject contradicts the entirety of contemporaneous testimony about Joseph's literary tastes. His enemies unanimously dismissed him as illiterate and ignorant at the time – as does Tucker elsewhere in his book, despite the obvious contradiction with the tidbit you quote - while even his own mother described him as the one of her children least inclined to reading. If Joseph truly were devouring all the dime novels he could get his hands on in order to accommodate his “expanding mental perceptions,” why did it take nearly five decades for anyone to notice?

Oh, and by the way, why doesn't *Mormonism: Its Origin, Rise, and Progress* say a single word about Kidd's and Joseph's supposed connection to the Island of Camora and the settlement of Moroni? If these were, indeed, “common names,” you'd think Tucker, of all people, would be the first to cry foul.

Some apologists say that Tucker's *Mormonism: Its Origin, Rise, and Progress* is anti-Mormon and thus anything in the book cannot be trusted.

“Some apologists?” Who?

The problem with this premise is that LDS scholar and Church history compiler B.H. Roberts quoted Tucker for background information on Joseph and FairMormon has an [article](#) where they quoted Tucker 4 times from his book as support for Joseph and even referred to Tucker as an “eye witness” to Joseph and his family. Is Tucker's peripheral information only useful and accurate when it shows Joseph and the Church in a positive and favorable light?

No, because Tucker's overall credibility is essentially nil for reasons that have nothing to do with his being pro or anti on any given topic. While I can't speak for B.H. Roberts or FAIR, who should have known better than to rely on such a spurious source, I once again invoke the Official Grand Poobah of Unofficial Mormon Apologists, none other than the late, great Hugh Nibley himself. I refer you to his penetrating and remarkably funny book *The Myth Makers*, which was reprinted as part of his collection [*Tinkling Cymbals and Sounding Brass*](#), available to be read in its entirety online at no charge.

The Myth Makers is written as the transcript of a mock trial, in which a “Chairman” directly questions witnesses against Joseph Smith using their published words as testimony. [In the excerpts I quote here](#), Pomeroy Tucker is coming under withering cross examination. Once again, to distinguish Nibley's words from yours and mine, I will put them in dark red, the color of fire.

Chairman: Now Mr. Tucker, I would like to ask you, first of all, just how well you knew Joseph Smith.

Tucker: Very well indeed: “he is distinctly remembered by me . . . from the age of twelve to twenty years.”

Chairman: And Smith was an important figure in Palmyra from the age of twelve to twenty years?

Tucker: Don't make me laugh, sir. "From the age of twelve to twenty years he is distinctly remembered as a dull-eyed, flaxen haired, prevaricating boy—noted only for his indolent and vagabondish character."¹⁰

Chairman: So during all the time you knew him, Smith was noted for one thing *only*—being a lazy tramp. Was he much of a public figure?

Tucker: On the contrary, "taciturnity was among his characteristic idiosyncrasies, and he seldom spoke to anyone outside of his immediate associates. . . . He nevertheless evidenced the rapid development of a thinking, plodding, evil-brewing mental composition—largely given to inventions of low cunning, schemes of mischief and deception, and false and mysterious pretensions. He . . . was never known to laugh."¹¹

Chairman: From what you say, Mr. Tucker, it is clear that you not only remember Joseph Smith distinctly, but that you knew him very well indeed—perhaps better than anyone else. It is plain that Smith was exceedingly hard to get acquainted with and that he was devilishly secretive, but even if he had been frank and open, the intimate knowledge you profess of his mental composition could only come from the closest association. Now, what was it that induced you, a very hard-working and ambitious young man, to spend your time with a perfectly worthless vagabond four and a half years your junior? You were no child when you first met Smith.

Tucker: You don't have to be a man's close friend to observe his character.

Chairman: According to you, you had to get close to Smith to observe him at all, since he wouldn't even speak to anyone "outside of his associates." And to say immediately what any man "largely" devoted his time and energy to, and what things he "was never known" to do, requires spending a good deal of time with him—unless, of course, your famous firsthand report is only hearsay. Did you think associating with Smith could contribute to your career? Did you perhaps find him an interesting person—even in a bad way?

Tucker: Of course not. As I told you, he was "noted only for his indolent and vagabondish character." He was "a dull-eyed, flaxen-haired, prevaricating boy" who never spoke to anybody and "was never known to laugh."

Chairman: That answers my question. It would be hard to imagine duller company.

The whole exchange is well worth reading. It also turns out Tucker left Palmyra and lived thirty miles away for nearly four of the eight years during which he supposedly knew Joseph Smith, a fact he conveniently omits from his own dubiously detailed history.

In his book, he invents a great of patently false nonsense, including a massive cave on the outskirts of town in which Joseph hunkered down to translate the Book of Mormon as a cadre of armed guards stood watch, which somehow went unnoticed by anyone else, a fact Tucker attributes to the idea that this bizarre and fascinating spectacle was paradoxically boring and "scarcely attracted the curiosity of outsiders."

As for your Tucker citations, how can one have an insatiable literary appetite and "expanding mental perceptions" when one is "indolent," "vagabondish," "dull-eyed," and "never known to laugh," as well

as taciturn to the point of complete withdrawal from the community at large?

Nibley, 1; Tucker, 0.

"We are sorry to observe, even in this enlightened age, so prevalent a disposition to credit the accounts of the marvellous. Even the frightful stories of money being hid under the surface of the earth, and enchanted by the Devil or Robert Kidd (Captain Kidd), are received by many of our respectable fellow citizens as truths." – [Wayne Sentinel, Palmyra, New York, February 16, 1825](#)

I don't understand why you think this quote adds anything to your point. It comes from an article that is unsigned and may or may not have been written by Tucker, and, more importantly, makes no reference to Joseph Smith whatsoever. It was not written about him. Rather, it's criticism of an unnamed "respectable gentleman in Tunbridge" who had a dream about where Captain Kidd had buried his treasure.

I guess it proves that people knew who Captain Kidd was in 1825, but it tells us nothing about Joseph Smith, and, curiously, it doesn't seem to mention the supposedly "common names" of Camora or Moroni at all.

Notice that this is considered "prevalent" and "received by many of our respectable fellow citizens as truths." The above contemporary 1825 Palmyra, New York newspaper quote was not tainted by any desire to damage Joseph Smith. This article provides a snapshot of the worldview of 1825 New England.

Glad it wasn't tainted by any desire to damage Joseph Smith, because it does absolutely no damage to Joseph Smith. If anything, it points out that Joseph Smith wasn't nearly as notorious in 1825 as Tucker and others later claimed. If he were, surely his name would have been all over this, as he would sell far more papers than just another respectable gentleman in Tunbridge.

Hill Cumorah and Moroni have absolutely nothing to do with Camora and Moroni from Captain Kidd stories?

Correct. Camora and Moroni cannot be found in any Captain Kidd stories or even in any of Captain Kidd's factual accounts.

Stories that Joseph and his treasure hunting family and buddies were familiar with?

We only have Pomeroy Tucker's highly suspect word on the matter that Joseph was a Captain Kidd fan, but, regardless, familiarity with Captain Kidd stories that contain no references to Camora or Moroni could not have provided fodder for plagiarism and have no bearing whatsoever on the authenticity of the Book of Mormon.

The original 1830 Book of Mormon uniform "Camorah" spelling?

Which, again, is different from the spelling on the 1808 map you provide.

This is all just a mere coincidence?

Not at all. To have coincidence, you first need incidence. As there's no incidence with regard to Camora or Moroni in connection to Captain Kidd, there's not enough happening here to rise to the level of coincidence.

8. There was a book published in 1825 Vermont entitled [*View of the Hebrews*](#).

There was, indeed. And, over a century later, it was republished by Brigham Young University, which suggests that the Church is not at all concerned if people read *View of the Hebrews* and compare it to the Book of Mormon. (They still have the entire *V of the H* text posted [on the BYU website](#).) Incidentally, Joseph Smith was equally unconcerned, and he even cited *View of the Hebrews* in 1842 as evidence for the authenticity of the Book of Mormon. It would be a very curious thing, indeed, for a plagiarist to call attention to his source material.

To read a single page of Ethan Smith's *View of the Hebrews* is to instantly recognize that the Book of Mormon did not plagiarize from it. In fact, for the benefit of those reading this, let's do precisely that. I'm going to pluck a paragraph at random and reproduce it here and let readers make a determination for themselves.

So here it is: the second paragraph from Chapter Three of *View of the Hebrews*, entitled "The Present State of Judah and Israel." Enjoy:

The whole present population of the Jews has been calculated at five millions. But the probability is, (as has been thought by good judges,) that they are far more numerous. One noted character says, that in Poland and part of Turkey, there are at least three millions of this people; and that among them generally, there is an unusual spirit of enquiry relative to Christianity. Mr. Noah says, that in the States of Barbary, their number exceeds seven hundred thousand. Their population in Persia, China, India, and Tartary, is stated (in a report of the London Society for the conversion of the Jews,) to be more than three hundred thousand. In Western Asia the Jews are numerous; and they are found in almost every land.*

In which part of the Book of Mormon can we expect to find Joseph's bastardized version of this?

And lest you think I'm plucking out a section that is unrepresentative of the majority of the *View of the Hebrews* text, feel free to reproduce any other section from *V of the H* and look for where Joseph adapted it in to his own allegedly derivative work. In addition, *View of the Hebrews* is just over 47,000 words long, compared to over 265,000 words in the Book of Mormon. If Joseph was just ripping off *V of the H*, how is it that Joseph's version is more than five times longer than his source material? True, Peter Jackson was able to pad out *The Hobbit* into a trilogy of three-hour movies, but this is even more ridiculous than that. (And *The Hobbit* movies were pretty darn ridiculous.)

You're making an apples-to-oranges comparison. *View of the Hebrews* is a polemical essay about Ethan Smith's theory that the Indians are Israelites. It is not, like the Book of Mormon, a narrative history. It's a recitation of historical facts and speculation; it has no story at all. In addition, the "evidences" that Ethan Smith provides to link the Indians to Israel are completely ignored in the Book of Mormon. You won't find chiasmus or much in the way of King James-style English in *V of the H*. There are no Nephites, Lamanites, Jaredites, or Liahonas, or cureloms or cumoms, or any Book of Mormon proper names or places. Even Captain Kidd is nowhere to be seen.

This is like comparing Tolstoy's *War and Peace* to an eBook titled [“The Invasion of France 1814”](#) by Captain Frederick William O. Maycock, D.S.O. Let's even pretend Captain Maycock and Tolstoy wrote their books in the same language and at the same time. Both likely reference similar historical events, but Maycock's work wouldn't do anything to help Tolstoy write his masterpiece, even though they may share common opinions and similarly understand widely accepted historical facts.

Still, let's take a look at your comparison.

View of the Hebrews compared to the Book of Mormon:

	View of the Hebrews Online Source	Book of Mormon Online Source
Published	1823, first edition 1825, second edition	1830, first edition
Location	Vermont Poultney, Rutland County Note: Oliver Cowdery, one of the Book of Mormon witnesses, lived in Poultney when “View of the Hebrews” was published.	Vermont Sharon, Windsor County Note: Windsor County is adjacent to Rutland County.
The destruction of Jerusalem	✓	✓
The scattering of Israel	✓	✓
The restoration of the Ten Tribes	✓	✓
Hebrews leave the Old World for the New World	✓	✓
Religion a motivating factor	✓	✓
Migrations a long journey	✓	✓
Encounter "seas" of "many waters"	✓	✓
The Americas an uninhabited land	✓	✓
Settlers journey northward	✓	✓
Encounter a valley of a great river	✓	✓
A unity of race (Hebrew) settle the land and are the ancestral origin of American Indians	✓	✓
Hebrew the origin of Indian language	✓	✓
Egyptian hieroglyphics	✓	✓
Lost Indian records	✓ A set of "yellow leaves" buried in Indian hill. Elder B.H. Roberts noted the "leaves" may be gold.	✓ Joseph Smith claimed the gold plates were buried in Hill Cumorah.

Breastplate, Urim & Thummim	✓	✓
A man standing on a wall warning the people saying, “Wo, wo to this city...to this people” while subsequently being attacked.	✓	✓
Prophets, spiritually gifted men transmit generational records	✓	✓
The Gospel preached in the Americas	✓	✓
Quotes whole chapters of Isaiah	✓	✓
Good and bad are a necessary opposition	✓	✓
Pride denounced	✓	✓
Polygamy denounced	✓	✓
Sacred towers and high places	✓	✓
Messiah visits the Americas	✓ Quetzalcoatl, the white bearded "Mexican Messiah"	✓
Idolatry and human sacrifice	✓	✓
Hebrews divide into two classes, civilized and barbarous	✓	✓
Civilized thrive in art, written language, metallurgy, navigation	✓	✓
Government changes from monarchy to republic	✓	✓
Civil and ecclesiastical power is united in the same person	✓	✓
Long wars break out between the civilized and barbarous	✓	✓
Extensive military fortifications, observations, "watch towers"	✓	✓
Barbarous exterminate the civilized	✓	✓
Discusses the United States	✓	✓
Ethan/Ether	✓ Elder B.H. Roberts noted: "Ethan is prominently connected with the recording of the matter in the one case, and Ether in the other."	✓

Source: B.H. Roberts, Studies of the Book of Mormon, [p.240-242,324-344](#)

Poor B.H. Roberts. His work on this subject has been so woefully misrepresented that it's almost criminal. We'll get to that later.

My initial plan was to make another chart where I add a fourth column describing why these supposed parallels are largely insignificant and, in some cases, ridiculous, but each point requires more text than a small box can allow. So I guess we have to do this the old fashioned way.

A. Both books reference the destruction of Jerusalem

Well, sort of, and one much more than the other. Ethan Smith begins his essay with a discussion of the sacking of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 AD, and then proceeds to describe all that immediately followed, lamenting the evils of Thadeus, Felix, Nero, and other Roman notables and quoting all the scripture in which Jesus foretold Jerusalem's sad fate. His entire first chapter is a historical recounting of the fate of Jerusalem after Christ, citing events and figures that play no role in the Book of Mormon whatsoever. More than 1/5th of its entire text is a synopsis and commentary on a slice of Palestinian history completely removed from anything in the Book of Mormon.

In contrast, the Book of Mormon recounts the family of Lehi escaping from the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem 670 years earlier and never mentions the Romans at all. Furthermore, its narrative leaves Jerusalem behind entirely after the 14th of its 531 pages and never goes back. With the exception of Jerusalem and Jesus Himself, none of the people, places, or events referenced in V of H's first 47 pages correlate in any way to the Book of Mormon. In content, length, and literary structure, the treatment of both books of two different historical accounts couldn't be more different.

Again, let's remember what *View of the Hebrews* is. As a treatise postulating an Israeli genealogy for Native Americans, it could not make its case without citing recorded historical events that overlap with events of concern to the Book of Mormon. How many other books have been written about these widely known and researched historical events? Should we assume that all of them have plagiarized each other?

B. Both books reference the Scattering of Israel

This should be considered a subsidiary of the first point, as Ethan Smith describes at great length Israel's scattering in the context of the Roman sacking of Palestine. The Book of Mormon, however, contains no description of any actual scattering and only makes reference to it in passing and in a much different doctrinal context. Ethan Smith focuses exclusively on the Lost Ten Tribes, which get a few passing mentions but don't really figure into the Book of Mormon narrative at all.

C. Both books reference the Restoration of the Ten Tribes

Well, yes, but with entirely different purposes and focus. In the Book of Mormon, the Ten Tribes are almost an afterthought – Lehi's family descend from Joseph, not the Lost Tribes, which is in direct contrast to Ethan Smith's theory that all Indians come from the Ten Tribes.

D. Both books reference Hebrews leaving the Old World for the New World

Yes, in very different contexts. Ethan Smith postulates that the Lost Tribes wandered into the Americas over the Bering Strait. Furthermore, he doesn't tell us any specific expeditions thing about any specific people in their company- remember, *V of H* isn't a story; it's an essay. The Book of Mormon introduces us to a group of people with names who leave Jerusalem, wander in the wilderness, build a ship, and arrive in America – never specifically identified as America in the text itself – by sea, not by land. The events are different, as is the literary approach. It's the difference between reading an academic essay about boys in New England boarding schools and reading *Catcher in the Rye*.

E. Religion a motivating factor

Why, yes, it was. Why is this a separate category? When you're talking about the scattering and gathering of Israel, isn't religion going to be a motivating factor? All of these initial objections are essentially subsets of the main charge repeated with only slight variations.

F. Migrations a long journey

Again, a distinction without a difference, as it's just another element of the original charge. Would it have made a difference here if the migration in one of the books had been a short journey? You could add a category that said "In both books, people ate food in the course of the referenced migrations" and it would be as noteworthy as saying, essentially, "it's a long way from Israel to America," which is all you're saying here.

G. Encounter "seas" of "many waters"

The word "seas" appears in *View of the Hebrews* precisely three times.

"This writer says, 'They entered into the Euphrates by the narrow passages of the river.' He must mean, they repassed this river in its upper regions, or small streams, away toward Georgia; and hence must have taken their course between the Black and Caspian seas." - p. 76

"We have a prediction relative to the ten tribes, which fully accords with the things exhibited of them, and of the natives of our land... They shall run to and fro, over all the vast regions, the dreary wilds, which lie between those extreme seas." - footnote, p. 107"

"Such texts have a special allusion to the lost tribes of the house of Israel. And their being called over mountains, and over seas, from the west, and from afar; receives an emphasis from the consideration of their being gathered from the vast wilds of America." - p. 159

Nobody seems to be actually encountering seas in any of these quotes.

The phrase "many waters" does not appear in *View of the Hebrews*.

H. The Americas an uninhabited land

Contrary to Ethan Smith, the Book of Mormon makes no claim that America was uninhabited when Lehi arrived. In fact, the text argues precisely the opposite conclusion, as they were preceded by the Jaredites and encounter Coriantumr, who clearly got there before they did. (Perhaps it was uninhabited when the Jaredites got there; I can't find a definitive statement on that subject one way or the other, but I may have missed it.) But if we're arguing for parallels, we probably ought to focus on the proposed Israeli ancestry of the Indians, which has no bearing on the Jaredites, who were not of the House of Israel.

I. Settlers journey northward

Yes, some settlers do tend to do that. How Joseph Smith would have imagined settlers going north without *View of the Hebrews*, I'll never know.

The word "northward" appears only once in *View of the Hebrews* on page 51: "Thence northward, on the shore of the said sea, as far as the point due west of Mount Lebanon." He's talking about the boundaries of Abraham's territory with no mention of settlers.

The word "north" appears 68 times, mostly in reference to the Lost Tribes who, according to the Bible, will come forth "out of the land of the North," which would suggest their journey was or will be in a

direction other than north. If there's a direct mention of a specific northward trek by any settlers in *View of the Hebrews*, I couldn't find it. And in the Book of Mormon, settlers travel in every direction. I don't see how this is a parallel of any significance, even if it were accurate, which it doesn't seem to be.

And why does this matter, exactly? Would it help if all settlers referenced in the Book of Mormon only went south?

J. Encounter a valley of a great river

This seems to be the only reference in *View of the Hebrews* that might apply.

"Other tribes assure us that their remote fathers, on their way to this country, 'came to a great river which they could not pass; when God dried up the river that they might pass over.' - page 106

No valleys are mentioned in connection with any rivers, great or otherwise.

Ethan Smith uses the tradition referenced on page 106 to describe his speculation that God must have allowed the Indians to cross the "Beering's Straits" by drying up rivers all over the place.

This is markedly different from the Book of Mormon's River of Laman and Valley of Lemuel, as the river was both crossable and un-dried up.

K. A unity of race (Hebrew) settle the land and are the ancestral origin of American Indians

View of the Hebrews and the Book of Mormon differ dramatically on this point. Ethan Smith can't stop yapping about the Ten Tribes, and how they came out of the north countries across the Bering Strait to escape Roman oppression. The Book of Mormon ignores the Ten Tribes as possible ancestors of the Indians, instead focusing on the non-lost tribes of Joseph and Judah in describing the Lehitites and the Mulekites, respectively. Then, for good measure, it adds a group – the Jaredites – that are utterly un-Hebrew and dominate the land well before the House of Israel even comes along.

If you get one clear message out of Ethan Smith's essay, it's that the Indians are definitely the Lost Tribes. Yet this is a point that the Book of Mormon blithely ignores. So much of *View of the Hebrews* is devoted to tying the fate of the Lost Tribes to the history of the Indians that Joseph Smith would have had to discard just about everything Ethan Smith wrote when producing the Book of Mormon, including all of the supposed evidences of Hebraism among the Indians that Ethan Smith cites, not a single one of which makes its way into the Book of Mormon. Why plagiarize a text when you ignore its central premise and all supporting evidences? In fact, how can that be said to be plagiarism at all?

L. Hebrew the origin of Indian language

Sort of. The Jaredites didn't speak Hebrew, and the Mulekites had all but forgotten it, and the Nephites kept records in Reformed Egyptian. Again, since Ethan Smith's theories tied the Indians to Israel, this, too, is just another subset of the original charge.

M. Egyptian hieroglyphics

What about them? The word "hieroglyphics" does not appear in either *View of the Hebrews* or the Book of Mormon. The Book of Mormon claims that the Lehitites wrote in "Reformed Egyptian," which are presumed to be hieroglyphics, but *View of the Hebrews* has nothing approaching a comparable reference. It makes no claims that the Indians wrote anything in Egyptian. It does claim, without any supporting material, that there appears to be some Egyptian influence in ancient American art. The

Book of Mormon doesn't mention art at all.

N. Lost Indian records

You expand that to say that this has reference to “yellow leaves” buried in a hill that B.H. Roberts supposedly speculated might be made of gold. Yet the phrase “yellow leaves” does not appear in *View of the Hebrews*.

You're likely referencing the four folded pieces of parchment, yellowed with age, dug out of an Indian grave that supposedly had a handful of Bible verses on them written in Hebrew, as mentioned on page 220 of *View of the Hebrews*. No reference to “Lost Indian records” on this parchment, unless you consider Deuteronomy to be a “lost Indian record.”

If B.H. Roberts or anyone else believes this old paper, which is described as being wrinkled and getting torn in half, might be made out of gold, that would be truly bizarre, as would presuming that this served as any kind of inspiration for the golden plates. Not only are they wholly dissimilar in form, they are also wholly dissimilar in function. Ethan Smith posits that the scraps of paper were discarded because the Indians could no longer read them and considered them worthless, while the golden plates recorded an intergenerational history and were buried specifically to preserve the history for future generations.

O. Breastplate, Urim & Thummim

Behold the sum total of references to the Breastplate, Urim and Thummim in *View of the Hebrews*:

“Before the Indian Archimagus officiates in making the supposed holy fire for the yearly atonement for sin, the sagan (waiter of the high priest) clothes him with a white ephod, which is a waist coat without sleeves. In resemblance of the Urim and Thum-inim, the American Archimagus wears a breast plate made of a white conch-shell with two holes bored in the middle of it, through which he puts the ends of an otter skin strap, and fastens a buck horn white button to the outside of each, as if in imitation of the precious stones of the Urim.” – page 173

None of this bears any resemblance to how the Urim and Thummim are referenced in the Book of Mormon itself or in its translation process, although I'm betting Joseph Smith could really have used some of those otter skin straps.

P. A man standing on a wall warning the people saying, “Wo, wo to this city...to this people” while subsequently being attacked.

The implication is that this was where Joseph lifted dialogue for Samuel the Lamanite, who never said the words you quote. The closest I can find is “Yea, wo unto this people who are called the people of Nephi except they shall repent” in Helaman 15:3. It's got “wo,” “people” and some familiar prepositions in it, but it's not close enough to constitute plagiarism, especially since it's part of a much larger speech that has no antecedent in *View of the Hebrews*. And it's obvious that 99.9999% of the dialogue in the Book of Mormon didn't come from *View of the Hebrews* if this is the best example of supposedly plagiarized dialogue you can find.

The two men crying “wo” are quite different figures, too. Samuel was a prophet in the New World under attack on a wall and miraculously protected, while the *View of the Hebrews* guy was an old, frail dude who wandered the streets of Jerusalem and stayed off the walls for seven years while repeating the quote you provide ad nauseum – unlike in the case of Samuel, this single phrase constituted the

entirety of his comments, which is probably why he was largely dismissed as a harmless quack. Yet when Jerusalem was under siege in 70 AD, *“he ascended the walls, and in a voice still more tremendous than ever, he exclaimed, ‘Wo, wo to this city, this temple, and this people!’ And he then added, (for the first time for the seven years,) ‘Wo, wo to myself!’ The words were no sooner uttered, than a stone from a Roman machine without the walls, struck him dead on the spot!”*

Looks more like an accident than an attack.

Q. Prophets, spiritually gifted men transmit generational records

Not at all, at least in the *View of the Hebrews* case. Ethan Smith doesn't identify a single person among the Indian population as a prophet, except perhaps Quetzalcoatl, a rather special case that we'll address when he shows up later in your list. Traditional Christians like Ethan Smith believe that there have been no prophets after Christ, and *View of the Hebrews* explicitly states on page 127 that “We are to expect no new revelation from heaven.” E. Smith's essay covers a time period solely after 70 AD, so it makes sense that he doesn't name any new prophets at all – maybe that's why you add the qualifier “spiritually gifted men,” which is so broad a label as to be a meaningless distinction. Of course, the Book of Mormon is dripping with prophets before, during, and after the time of Christ.

As for the idea that these V of H dudes with spiritual gifts are “transmit[ting] generational records,” that's just nonsense. Any records that Ethan Smith imagines being kept are also imagined as being thrown away or left behind in Jerusalem, because he posited that the Indians considered them worthless. Ethan Smith repeatedly laments the fact that no such records survive and that all the information we have about them comes from unwritten and unreliable oral histories.

R. The Gospel preached in the Americas

View of the Hebrews references the preaching of the gospel in the Americas on page 187, which I quote at length here:

It seems the Spanish missionaries found such traces of resemblance between some of the rites of the religion of the natives of Mexico, and the religion which they wished to introduce, that our author says, "They persuaded them that the gospel had in very remote times, been already preached in America. And they investigated its traces in the Aztec ritual, with the same ardour which the learned who in our days engage in the study of Sanscrit, display in discussing the analogy between the Greek mythology and that of the Ganges and the Burrampooter." It is a noted fact that there is a far greater analogy between much of the religion of the Indians, and Christianity, than between that of any other heathen nation on earth and Christianity.

In the Book of Mormon, the actual preaching of the gospel in the Americas is recorded firsthand by the people preaching it on page after page after page. Yet Ethan Smith never records the actual preaching of the gospel; he merely looks for parallels in Native American history and ritual and explores them at length. Those supposed parallels make up the bulk of Ethan Smith's text, but the Book of Mormon completely ignores all of them. Many critics of the Book of Mormon claim that it is actually far too Christian, as it entirely lacks the Native American flavor that would have been there had Joseph been trying to manufacture a history of the Indians consistent with Ethan Smith's premises.

And, again, note the style and subject of the above quoted paragraph. None of it has any corollary in the Book of Mormon.

S. Quotes whole chapters of Isaiah

And yet only [8.3% of the Isaiah verses](#) quoted in *View of the Hebrews* are also included in the Book of Mormon. This is silly, anyway, as Joseph already had a Bible. If he wanted to plagiarize Isaiah, why did he need to use V of H as a middleman?

View of the Hebrews quotes [a lot of stuff besides Isaiah, too](#), specifically Deuteronomy 30; Jeremiah 16, 23, 30-31, 35-37; Zephaniah 3; Amos 9; Hosea and Joel. Why didn't any of those passages make their way into the Book of Mormon?

T. Good and bad are a necessary opposition

That's the message of Star Wars, too. Should we assume George Lucas also lifted it from *View of the Hebrews*?

U. Pride denounced

So did *View of the Hebrews* lift that from Greek mythology? Because the denunciation of pride is a common theme in world literature since the beginning of the written word. In fact, I think even the Bible has a thing or two to say about it.

V. Polygamy denounced

The word "polygamy" does not appear in either text. The Book of Mormon has Jacob Chapter 2, which accurately fits this description, but the nearest I can find to a denunciation of polygamy in *View of the Hebrews* is on page 104, where 19th Century missionaries visit a Delaware Indian chief and record their conversation.

"Long time ago, (he added) it was a good custom among his people to take but one wife, and that for life. But now they had become so foolish, and so wicked, that they would take a number of wives at a time; and turn them away at pleasure!"

This looks to be as much a denunciation of divorce as polygamy, and the context of this is quite different in both texts. This is the expression of one modern Indian chief's personal opinion of ancient history, not a sweeping prophetic declaration of the will of the Lord. This chief's opinion is not cited to define doctrine but rather to illustrate parallels in Indian and Christian traditions.

W. Sacred towers and high places

View of the Hebrews used the word "tower" fifteen times, all in reference to military towers in Jerusalem at the time of the 70 A.D. siege - nothing "sacred" about them. The "sacred towers" in the Book of Mormon – King Benjamin's tower and the Zoramite tower of Rameumptom – have no antecedent in *View of the Hebrews*.

However, I must concede that both books, as well as pretty much every book ever written with any geographical information whatsoever, make reference to high places.

X. Messiah visits the Americas

Okay, this one's a little too much fun.

It is impossible to review the history of ancient America without encountering the legend of

Quetzalcoatl, who by most accounts was actually a winged serpent and not a white-bearded man. The irony is that the Book of Mormon not only doesn't mention him at all; it makes no attempt at all to tie Christ's visit to any of the Quetzalcoatl legends. Jesus in the Book of Mormon acts pretty much the same way as Jesus of the New Testament and not like any winged serpent. Why would a plagiarizing Joseph Smith leave the Quetzalcoatl legend entirely untouched?

You say the *View of the Hebrews* mentions "Quetzalcoatl, the white bearded 'Mexican Messiah.'" Why don't you say "Jesus" instead?

Because Ethan Smith thought Quetzalcoatl was Moses. *Moses*, of all people! Tying the serpent on a stick to the iconography of Quetzalcoatl, he sees the ancient legends as reference to Moses and not Christ. So should we assume Jesus the Messiah for everyone except Mexicans, because Moses gets "Mexican Messiah" duty?

Y. Idolatry and human sacrifice

There's one reference to human sacrifice in *View of the Hebrews*, found on page 101. Here it is:

This may account for the degeneracy of some Indians far to the west, reported in the journals of Mr. Giddings, in his exploring tour. He informs, "They differ greatly in their ideas of the Great Spirit; one supposes that he dwells in a buffalo, another in a wolf, another in a bear. another in a bird, another in a rattlesnake. On great occasions, such as when they go to war, and when they return, (he adds) they sacrifice a dog, and have a dance. On these occasions they formerly sacrificed a prisoner taken in the war; but through the benevolent exertions of a trader among them, they have abandoned the practice of human sacrifice.

All we know about human sacrifice in *View of the Hebrews* is that one tribe stopped doing it at some point. The Book of Mormon doesn't have a lot to say about human sacrifice, either, but what it does say is entirely dissimilar to the passage here. References to idolatry are also scarce in the Book of Mormon.

The point with this item, and with many others, is that Ethan Smith is commenting and speculating on historical events in ancient America, and the Book of Mormon claims to be recounting historical events in ancient America. By most accounts, idolatry and human sacrifice were historical events in ancient America, so we should not be surprised to find independent references to them in both works.

How many works about World War II have been written? If two of them mentioned Nazi atrocities against Jews, would you accuse one author of plagiarism?

Z. Hebrews divide into two classes, civilized and barbarous

View of the Hebrews speculates about this and provides no specifics, while the Book of Mormon is far more complex than that. In the initial division between Nephites and Lamanites, the Nephites are civilized and the Lamanites are barbarous. But these adjectives cannot be permanently applied to either group. At times, the Lamanites are more righteous than the Nephites, and for two hundred years there are "no manner of -ites" and everyone lives in peace. The subtleties and details of the Book of Mormon on this subject have no antecedent in *View of the Hebrews*.

AA. Civilized thrive in art, written language, metallurgy, navigation

Really? Where does the Book of Mormon mention any art? Why does the *View of the Hebrews* lament

the utter loss of written language among the Indians? *View of the Hebrews* mentions navigation with regard to biblical prophecy, but it makes no claims that Indians were capable of it, as Ethan Smith insisted they came to America by land and not by sea.

In any case, there's historical evidence of an ancient American civilization that produced art, written language, metallurgy, and – debatably – navigation. What's notable is that the treatment of identified historical facts in both records is so strikingly different.

BB. Government changes from monarchy to republic

Not at all. The government in the Book of Mormon changes from a monarchy to a “reign of the judges,” which bears little or no resemblance to a republic. The judges are only chosen by the voice of the people when one dies or resigns; otherwise, judgeships are passed down hereditarily, making this a modified monarchy more than a republic. There's no senate or congress; judges unilaterally make and enforce laws with no public input and no accountability to voters, although their judgments can be overturned by a group of “lesser judges.” Book of Mormon government is actually quite strange and quite different from American government, and it has no antecedent whatsoever in *View of the Hebrews*.

CC. Civil and ecclesiastical power is united in the same person

Which person? Are we only talking about the monarchy and not the republic, a republic that doesn't exist in the Book of Mormon? Because in monarchies, then and now, ecclesiastical authority often rests with the king. That's not a concept that either Smith would need to invent or plagiarize. Even today, Elizabeth II is the head of the Church of England. What's striking is that in the Book of Mormon, this ecclesiastical authority extends to the judges once the monarchy is disbanded, as opposed to *View of the Hebrews*, where this is not the case.

DD. Long wars break out between the civilized and barbarous

Yes. That's also true in Mel Gibson's Meso-American-based movie “Apocalypto,” which he, too, must have plagiarized from *View of the Hebrews*. The historical evidence, then and now, suggested that in ancient America, long wars broke out between the civilized and barbarous. What would be remarkable is if any book dealing with ancient history in this region would fail to mention it.

EE. Extensive military fortifications, observations, "watch towers"

Every watchtower mentioned in *View of the Hebrews* is in Jerusalem of 70 AD, not in ancient America. As for military fortification and observations – yes, both books include observations, as does every book ever written – see item DD, above. Wars tend to have these sorts of things, and the idea of war is not something Joseph Smith would have had to plagiarize from Ethan Smith.

FF. Barbarous exterminate the civilized

Not in the Book of Mormon, they don't. The Nephites who perish at the end are every bit as barbarous as the Lamanites. The complexity of who's civilized and who's barbarous defies easy categorization in the Book of Mormon. Again, no antecedent to this in *View of the Hebrews*.

GG. Discusses the United States

Nope. The Book of Mormon makes no reference to the United States whatsoever. In fact, it doesn't even explicitly identify its geography as being on the American continent. People, including church leaders, have interpreted many of its references to “this land” or “the land of promise” as references to

the United States, but the text itself doesn't sustain that interpretation, particularly if you accept a Meso-American limited geography model.

HH. Ethan/Ether

Seriously?

This would be a good time to offer a view on *View of the Hebrews* from my favorite unofficial apologist, Hugh Nibley, once again in fiery red:

"If someone will show me how to draw a circle," cries the youthful Joseph Smith, "I will make you a fine Swiss watch!" So Joachim or Anselm or Ethan Smith or Rabelais or somebody takes a stick and draws a circle in the sand, and forthwith the adroit and wily Joseph turns out a beautiful running mechanism that tells perfect time! This is not an exaggeration. The Book of Mormon in structure and design is every bit as complicated, involved, and ingenious as the works of a Swiss watch, and withal just as smoothly running. . . . The writer of that book brought together thousands of ideas and events and knit them together in a most marvelous unity. Yet the critics like to think they have explained the Book of Mormon completely if they can just discover where Joseph Smith *might* have got *one* of his ideas or expressions!"

(Right on, Hugh. Testify, brother!)

As a personal addendum, I offer my own experience.

I have written an – as of now – unpublished young adult novel titled “Gods, Monsters, and Jeff Downey,” which incorporates elements of Greek mythology and places them in a modern setting which directly corresponds to the area in Calabasas, California, where I went to high school. If you read Greek mythology, you will easily recognize where I’ve found many of my ideas, and if you’re even remotely familiar with the geography of where I grew up, every locale in the book will produce an instant flash of recognition.

No such flashes of recognition take place in reading *View of the Hebrews* in comparison to the Book of Mormon. Ethan Smith looks at ancient America and, while both books share some commonalities with regard to acknowledgment of widely accepted historical facts, *View of the Hebrews* reaches vastly different conclusions than anything found in the B of M text, which makes no sense at all if this was one of Joseph’s primary sources of inspiration.

But just for the sake of argument, I want to hypothetically concede your point and imagine that Joseph did sit down with *View of the Hebrews* as he was preparing to fabricate an ancient American record. Even if this were the case, the act of imagination necessary to produce the Book of Mormon with *View of the Hebrews* as a source would be just as arduous a task as writing the whole thing from scratch. There are plenty of people who are familiar with both Greek mythology and Calabasas geography, yet that familiarity does not qualify them to write a young adult novel about them. And if any of them were able enough writers to try their hand at writing a book incorporating both those elements, there is an almost-zero percent chance that what they would produce would bear anything but the most cursory resemblance to “Gods, Monsters, and Jeff Downey.”

Sure, you could expect to see Zeus and Prometheus and Mulholland Drive in both books, as such elements are common knowledge of people familiar with Greece and/or Calabasas, but the events, characters, and language would be entirely different. And the differences would be even greater if someone with that knowledge were writing an essay about Greek mythology as taught at Calabasas High School as opposed to a young adult fantasy novel. *View of the Hebrews* and the Book of Mormon are two vastly different kinds of books, and the similarities between the two, beyond a recognition of commonly accepted biblical and ancient American history, simply aren't there.

Reverend Ethan Smith was the author of *View of the Hebrews*. Ethan Smith was a pastor in Poultney, Vermont when he wrote and published the book. Oliver Cowdery – also a Poultney, Vermont resident – was a member of Ethan's congregation during this time and before he went to New York to join his cousin (third cousins) Joseph Smith. As you know, Oliver Cowdery played an instrumental role in bringing forth the Book of Mormon.

So you've proven that Joseph could have seen *View of the Hebrews* prior to the production of the Book of Mormon. This merits a shrug of the shoulders and nothing else. Since the Book of Mormon text itself bears only the most cursory reference to *View of the Hebrews*, it doesn't matter at all whether or not Joseph or Oliver had seen it before 1830. Certainly Joseph was at least passingly familiar with the text later in life, as he cites it as evidence for the Book of Mormon's authenticity – again, an odd thing for a supposed plagiarist of that material to do. Nobody in Joseph's lifetime thought the two texts were similar enough to merit any accusation of plagiarism, and nobody who spends even an hour with either text can plausibly claim that one was derived from the other.

LDS General Authority and scholar Elder B.H. Roberts privately researched the link between the Book of Mormon, the *View of the Hebrews*, Joseph's father having the same dream in 1811 as Lehi's dream, etc. that were available to Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, Martin Harris and others before the publication of the Book of Mormon. Elder Roberts' private research was meant only for the eyes of the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve and was never intended to be available to the public. Roberts' work was later published in 1985 as *Studies of the Book of Mormon*. At the conclusion of his research, Elder B.H. Roberts came to the following conclusion:



Did Ethan Smith's *View of the Hebrews* furnish structural material for Joseph Smith's *Book of Mormon*? It has been pointed out in these pages that there are many things in the former book that might well have suggested many major things in the other. Not a few things merely, one or two, or half dozen, but many; and it is this fact of many things of similarity and the cumulative force of them that makes them so serious a menace to Joseph Smith's story of the Book of Mormon's origin.

B.H. Roberts - Mormon Seventy and LDS church historian
Studies of the Book of Mormon, p.240

No, he didn't come to that conclusion. In a letter to his fellow church leaders with reference to the book, Roberts said, "Let me say once and for all, so as to avoid what might otherwise call for repeated explanation, that what is herein set forth *does not represent any conclusions of mine.*" [Emphasis

added.] The entire book, including the quote you provide, is written in the voice of a straw man critic he created, and these aren't arguments he, himself, agreed with in real life.

Elder Roberts was a firm believer in the historicity and divine nature of the Book of Mormon throughout his life, and he prepared this comparison as a “devil’s advocate” sort of brief on the best arguments that critics of the Book of Mormon would be able to muster. And, overall, they’re pretty flimsy.

To cite him without offering that context is to defame a good and faithful man and attribute opinions to him that were often diametrically opposed to what he actually believed.

9. [The Late War Between the United States and Great Britain](#): This was an 1819 textbook written in King James Version style language for New York state school children, one of them very likely being Joseph Smith. The [first chapter](#) alone is stunning as it reads incredibly like the Book of Mormon:

1. Now it came to pass, in the one thousand eight hundred and twelfth year of the christian era, and in the thirty and sixth year after the people of the provinces of Columbia had declared themselves a free and independent nation;
2. That in the sixth month of the same year, on the first day of the month, the chief Governor, whom the people had chosen to rule over the land of Columbia;
3. Even James, whose sir-name was Madison, delivered a written paper to the Great Sannhedrim of the people, who were assembled together.
4. And the name of the city where the people were gathered together was called after the name of the chief captain of the land of Columbia, whose fame extendeth to the uttermost parts of the earth; albeit, he had slept with his fathers...

You and I have a very different definition of “stunning.” Since this was deliberately written to sound like the King James Bible, the only way it can be said to be “incredibly like the Book of Mormon” is to be surprised that any other book would also choose to mimic the KJV. No one would be stunned to acknowledge that this reads “incredibly like the King James Bible.” In fact, nobody would be likely to say that at all, even though the phrases you later insist were lifted out of this book can all be found in the Bible, too, which is where the *Late War* authors got them.

In substance, this textbook is absolutely nothing like the Book of Mormon. The story is completely different; the characters are completely different. There’s no mention of the War of 1812 in the Book of Mormon, and there are no lengthy religious sermons in the *Late War*. It would certainly help your argument if at some point when the Jaredites were fighting, Napoleon were to show up. I guess we have to wait until you talk about the next candidate you propose as a Book of Mormon source.

Also, did Joseph plagiarize *View of the Hebrews* or *The Late War Between the United States and Great Britain*? When did Captain Kidd enter the picture? Don’t you have to make up your mind on this? Because the Book of Mormon production process you’re now suggesting has Joseph poring over all different kinds of manuscripts – from childhood textbooks to Ethan Smith to that trusty, error-filled

1769 version of the KJV, rummaging through Captain Kidd's letters and stories and maps of every tiny village across a 2,000 mile radius as well as maps of African islands – and lifting a word here, a two-or-three word phrase there, and somehow cobbling them into 265,000 words of an internally consistent, theologically complex, and Semitically-influenced tome that is markedly different from any and all of his supposed source materials.

Along with the above KJV language style presence throughout the book, what are the following Book of Mormon phrases, verbatim, themes, and storylines doing in a children's school textbook that was used in Joseph Smith's own time and backyard? A mere decade before the publication of the Book of Mormon?

Okay, let's take a look.

- Devices of “curious workmanship” in relation to boats and weapons.
- A “stripling” soldier “with his “weapon of war in his hand.”
“A certain chief captain...was given in trust a band of more than two thousand chosen men, to go forth to battle” and who “all gave their services freely for the good of their country.”
- Fortifications: “the people began to fortify themselves and entrench the high Places round about the city.”
- Objects made “partly of brass and partly of iron, and were cunningly contrived with curious works, like unto a clock; and as it were a large ball.”
- “Their polished steels of fine workmanship.”
- “Nevertheless, it was so that the freeman came to the defence of the city, built strongholds and forts and raised up fortifications in abundance.”
- Three Indian Prophets.
- “Rod of iron.”
- War between the wicked and righteous.
- Maintaining the standard of liberty with righteousness.
- Righteous Indians vs. savage Indians.
- False Indian prophets.
- Conversion of Indians.
- Bands of robbers/pirates marauding the righteous protagonists.
- Brass plates.
- “And it came to pass, that a great multitude flocked to the banners of the great Sanhedrim” compared to Alma 62:5: “And it came to pass that thousands did flock unto his standard, and did take up their swords in defense of their freedom...”
- Worthiness of Christopher Columbus.
- Ships crossing the ocean.
- A battle at a fort where righteous white protagonists are attacked by an army made up of dark-skinned natives driven by a white military leader. White protagonists are prepared for battle and slaughter their opponents to such an extent that they fill the trenches surrounding the fort with dead bodies. The surviving elements flee into the wilderness/forest.

- Cataclysmic earthquake followed by great darkness.
- Elephants/mammoths in America.
- Literary Hebraisms/Chiasmus.
- Boats and barges built from trees after the fashion of the ark.
- A bunch of “it came to pass”
- Many, many more [parallels](#).

The staggering parallels and similarities to the Book of Mormon are astounding.

Consider me both unstaggered and unastounded.

I probably should go through each of these one by one, but so many of them are ridiculous on their face that they don’t merit comment. Wow, two books referencing ships crossing the ocean? And both books *also* have elephants in them? What are the odds?!

These “staggering parallels” were not discovered by means of reading both texts and looking for common themes or passages; they were discovered by means of a computer analysis looking for identical words in thousands of different texts. Conceptually, the passages containing these “parallels” are generally referencing starkly different things and events, and they are using similar short phrases to describe stuff with no relationship to each other. Furthermore, none of the identical phrases are longer than five words long – i.e. “and it came to pass,” a Biblical phrase - and almost all are only two or three words long.

So you provide things like the quote “partly of brass and partly of iron, and were cunningly contrived with curious works, like unto a clock; and as it were a large ball” as if that phrase appears in the Book of Mormon, which it doesn’t. Mormons, however, would read that phrase and assume it has reference to the Liahona, which was an item made of brass and of “curious workmanship.” But the *Late War* is here describing a torpedo, an item as unlike a Liahona as it is possible to be. So for this to be a Book of Mormon source, one has to think Joseph Smith scoured this text to find a phrase – “curious works” - and modify it into “curious workmanship” and add “brass” and “ball” and apply it to a concept that has no corollary whatsoever in *Late War*. What kind of plagiarist goes to that much trouble? What kind of writer could possibly work that way?

Yes, the phrase “rod of iron” is in *Late War*. It’s on page 15, and it reads like this:

Then will we rule them with a rod of iron; and they shall be, unto us, hewers of wood and drawers of water.

The phrase “rule them with a rod of iron” is a Biblical phrase used twice in the Book of Revelation – see verses 2:27 and 12:5 – and a variation is in the Old Testament in Revelation Psalm 2:9, which says “Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron.” In both *Late War* and the Bible, the rod of iron is a weapon, probably used to smack people over the head. Nowhere in the Book of Mormon do we find a seven-word quote from “*Late War*,” so the Biblical “rule them with a rod of iron” becomes merely “rod of iron.” And, furthermore, Lehi’s rod of iron is some kind of a long handrail used to guide people through mists of darkness toward the Tree of Life, utterly unlike a rod of iron you rule people with, and with no head-smacking in sight.

Three identical words; two completely unrelated concepts. Yet we're supposed to presume this where Joseph got the idea for Lehi's "rod of iron?"

This gets very absurd very quickly.

This [outstanding web page](#) outlines very clearly and simply just how devastating the Late War is to the Book of Mormon and its claims.

Whereas [this outstanding web page](#) is utterly devastating to the seriously flawed analysis of your outstanding web page.

Rick Grunder [states](#) in his paper:

"The presence of Hebraisms and other striking parallels in a popular children's textbook (Late War), on the other hand – so close to Joseph Smith in his youth – must sober our perspective." – p.770

Jeff Lindsay [states](#) on his blog:

"Yes, there are parallels, but scattered, weak, and not very helpful to a would-be plagiarizer." – p. 1
10. Another fascinating book published in 1809, *The First Book of Napoleon*, is shocking.

"Shocking," is it? The same way the parallels to the Late War are "stunning," "staggering," and "astounding," and Book of Mormon similarities to local names on maps are "striking?" You offer no such adjective for your opinion on *View of the Hebrews*. May I suggest "flabbergasting?"

Another personal interlude, if I may. I got an MBA from Brigham Young University in 1999. And in my first year of study, my finance professor taught us how to calculate the net present value of an asset. He said there are four or five different methods to do just that.

"You know what that means, don't you?" he asked the class.

We didn't.

"It means," he said, "that none of them are any good."

In other words, if there were one simple, easy, and reliable way to calculate an NPV, there would be no need for another.

Similarly, every time you add a new volume as the supposed smoking gun of where Joseph cribbed the Book of Mormon, you weaken your argument. If there were one verifiable and undeniable source for his plagiarism, there would be no need to come up with half a dozen others. And if Joseph really was combing through such voluminous amounts of maps and literature and memorizing all these disconnected snippets and then reciting them to Oliver without referencing the texts themselves and all doing so unnoticed, he was likely even more of a genius than even most Mormons would imagine.

But okay, let's see what's so shocking.

The first chapter:

1. And behold it came to pass, in these latter days, that an evil spirit arose on the face of the earth, and greatly troubled the sons of men.
2. And this spirit seized upon, and spread amongst the people who dwell in the land of Gaul.
3. Now, in this people the fear of the Lord had not been for many generations, and they had become a corrupt and perverse people; and their chief priests, and the nobles of the land, and the learned men thereof, had become wicked in the imagines of their hearts, and in the practices of their lives.
4. And the evil spirit went abroad amongst the people, and they raged like unto the heathen, and they rose up against their lawful king, and slew him, and his queen also, and the prince their son; yea, verily, with a cruel and bloody death.
5. And they moreover smote, with mighty wrath, the king's guards, and banished the priests, and nobles of the land, and seized upon, and took unto themselves, their inheritances, their gold and silver, corn and oil, and whatsoever belonged unto them.
6. Now it came to pass, that the nation of the Gauls continued to be sorely troubled and vexed, and the evil spirit whispered unto the people, even unto the meanest and vilest thereof...

...and it continues on. It's like reading from the Book of Mormon.

Actually, it's more like reading from *The Late War Between the United States and Great Britain*. Do I smell plagiarism? How else could the Napoleon writers come up with the phrase "it came to pass" in verses 1 and 6? Also, both books include the phrase "for many generations" and "unto the people." Am I supposed to assume this is merely coincidence?

This, too, is clearly written to mimic King James English. It's supposed to be like reading from the Bible. Which it is, as much or more than it's like reading from the Book of Mormon.

Interesting that you cite this as a first chapter, since the first chapter of the Book of Mormon, other than its KJV style, is nothing at all like this.

The first chapter:

1. I, Nephi, having been born of goodly parents, therefore I was taught somewhat in all the learning of my father; and having seen many afflictions in the course of my days, nevertheless, having been highly favored of the Lord in all my days; yea, having had a great knowledge of the goodness and the mysteries of God, therefore I make a record of my proceedings in my days.
2. Yea, I make a record in the language of my father, which consists of the learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians.
3. And I know that the record which I make is true; and I make it with mine own hand; and I make it according to my knowledge.
4. For it came to pass in the commencement of the first year of the reign of Zedekiah, king of Judah, (my father, Lehi, 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.

5. Wherefore it came to pass that my father, Lehi, as he went forth prayed unto the Lord, yea, even with all his heart, in behalf of his people.
6. And it came to pass as he prayed unto the Lord, there came a pillar of fire and dwelt upon a rock before him; and he saw and heard much; and because of the things which he saw and heard he did quake and tremble exceedingly.

I keep waiting for the evil spirit from the land of Gaul to show up, but I wait in vain.

When I first read this along with other passages from The First Book of Napoleon, I was floored.

Didn't want to go with "flabbergasted," huh?

Here we have two early 19th century contemporary books written at least a decade before the Book of Mormon that not only read and sound like the Book of Mormon but which also carry so many of its parallels and themes as well.

Sound like the Book of Mormon? Sure, because these two books were deliberately designed to sound like the KJV, and the Book of Mormon also sounds like the KJV.

But "parallels and themes?" No.

Both Late War and First War are about, you know, war. It's right there in the title. And while there's quite a bit of war in the Book of Mormon, the religious themes of the Book of Mormon Christ are wide and far-reaching well beyond these books' clumsy attempts to tie religion to wartime patriotism. These goofy 19th Century exercises in biblical mimicry don't begin to approach the scope and breadth of Book of Mormon themes.

The following are a side-by-side comparison of the beginning of The First Book of Napoleon with the beginning of the Book of Mormon:

The First Book of Napoleon:

Condemn not the (writing)...an account...the First Book of Napoleon...upon the face of the earth...it came to pass...the land...their inheritances their gold and silver and...the commandments of the Lord...the foolish imaginations of their hearts...small in stature...Jerusalem...because of the perverse wickedness of the people.

Book of Mormon:

Condemn not the (writing)...an account...the First Book of Nephi...upon the face of the earth...it came to pass...the land...his inheritance and his gold and his silver and...the commandments of the Lord...the foolish imaginations of his heart...large in stature...Jerusalem...because of the wickedness of the people.

Wait a minute. This is the "beginning of the First Book of Napoleon?" Earlier, you quoted the first six verses, which I assumed were the beginning, and they don't sound anything like this. So which one's the real beginning?

Turns out that in order to get this supposed parallel, you have to comb through *twenty-five pages* of the First Book of Napoleon and link up unrelated short phrases by means of ellipses, and then perform a similar surgery on the Book of Mormon text. Using that method, I've discovered that your CES Letter

was directly plagiarized from *Life*, the autobiography of Rolling Stones guitarist Keith Richards, which, in an astonishing parallel too remarkable to be coincidence, is the book nearest to me as I'm typing this reply. And, in what really is an odd coincidence, they both start with same word! Am I supposed to just assume this is a coincidence?

The following are a side-by-side comparison of the beginning of Letter to a CES Director and the beginning of *Life* by Keith Richards. Frankly, I'm flabbergasted.

Letter to a CES Director:

Thank you... you're going to have... a real insight... [into] the laws of the land... There is no direct evidence...I found [cocaine]... in that which is to come...

***Life* by Keith Richards:**

Thanks and praises... you're not going to have... a real education... on this little point of law... there is a problem here about evidence...we found cocaine in that damn car...

...and it continues on. It's like reading from Letter to a CES Director!

Also, both the CES letter and *Life* mention elephants. ("There was a huge business of getting elephants on stage in Memphis." – *Life*, page 12.) Just one more coincidence, huh? You really expect me to believe that?

11. The Book of Mormon taught and still teaches a Trinitarian view of the Godhead. Joseph Smith's early theology also held this view.

It's not nearly that simple, as I'll discuss below.

As part of the over [100,000 changes](#) to the Book of Mormon, there were major changes made to reflect Joseph's evolved view of the Godhead.

100,000 changes? Actually, it's probably more than that. The Book of Mormon was submitted to the printer without any punctuation whatsoever, along with heaven knows how many spelling errors. (Oliver, why couldn't you have been an infallible speller?) So every single item of punctuation can rightly be considered a change in the original manuscript. Certainly the 100,000 are almost all punctuation additions and corrections.

The handful of changes that have the slightest degree of doctrinal significance barely register in the double digits, making them approximately .01% of all the changes, total. So let's deal with those, most of which do, in fact, directly relate to the Trinitarian view, although I don't think it's appropriate to refer to them as "major changes," for reasons I'll discuss below.

Examples:

Original 1830 Edition Text View Online	Current, Altered Text View Online
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1 Nephi 3 (p.25): And he said unto me, Behold, the virgin whom thou seest, is the mother of God, after the manner of the flesh.	1 Nephi 11:18: And he said unto me: Behold, the virgin whom thou seest is the mother of the Son of God, after the manner of the flesh.
1 Nephi 3 (p.25): And the angel said unto me, behold the Lamb of God, yea, even the Eternal Father!	1 Nephi 11:21: And the angel said unto me: Behold the Lamb of God, yea, even the Son of the Eternal Father!
1 Nephi 3 (p.26): And I looked and beheld the Lamb of God, that he was taken by the people; yea, the Everlasting God, was judged of the world;	1 Nephi 11:32: And I looked and beheld the Lamb of God, that he was taken by the people; yea, the Son of the everlasting God was judged of the world;
1 Nephi 3 (p.32): These last records...shall make known to all kindreds, tongues, and people, that the Lamb of God is the Eternal Father and the Savior of the world;	1 Nephi 13:40: These last records...shall make known to all kindreds, tongues, and people, that the Lamb of God is the Son of the Eternal Father, and the Savior of the world;

Your problem seems to be that the text was originally Trinitarian, while the changes are not. But that demonstrates a misunderstanding of doctrine of the Trinity, because even with the changes, these verses remain perfectly consistent with Trinitarian creeds.

No Trinitarian would object to calling Jesus Christ the Son of God, or the Son of the Eternal Father. They fully believe that Jesus is the Son of God. They also believe that Jesus is his own father, as well as a separate individual from his Father, but that he is also *not* separate from his Father. They believe there are *definitely* three Gods, but more importantly, there is *definitely* only one God.

And if that makes no sense, it's because, by definition, it's not supposed to.

From that great theological treatise, Eric Idle's movie "Nuns of the Run:"

Eric Idle: Let me try and summarize this: God is his son. And his son is God. But his son moonlights as a holy ghost, a holy spirit, and a dove. And they all send each other, even though they're all one and the same thing.

Robbie Coltrane: You've got it. You really could be a nun!

Eric Idle: Thanks! Wait - what I said – does that make any sense to you?

Robbie Coltrane: Well, no. And it makes no sense to anybody. That's why you have to believe it.

If you want a more authoritative definition, here's the doctrine of the Trinity, as described by the Athanasian Creed:

We worship one God in trinity, and trinity in unity; neither confounding the persons, nor dividing the substance. For there is one person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Ghost. But the Godhead of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, is all one; the glory equal, the majesty co-eternal. Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Ghost. The Father uncreate, the Son uncreate, and the Holy Ghost uncreate. The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the Holy Ghost incomprehensible. The Father eternal, the Son eternal, and the Holy Ghost eternal. And yet there are not three eternals, but one eternal. As also there are not three incomprehensibles, nor three uncreated; but one uncreated, and one incomprehensible. So likewise the Father is almighty, the Son almighty, and the Holy Ghost almighty, and yet there are not three Almighties, but one Almighty. So

the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Ghost is God, and yet there are not three Gods, but one God.

To quote Elder James E. Talmage, “It would be difficult to conceive of a greater number of inconsistencies and contradictions, expressed in words as few.”

So the problem with understanding the Trinity is that, by definition, it’s “incomprehensible,” so the way people comprehend the incomprehensible often tends to be, in practice, fairly consistent with the Mormon view. Pollster Gary Lawrence, who worked with me on my father’s unsuccessful 2010 reelection campaign, conducted a series of polls on this subject, and the results were quite interesting.

The poll asked two questions of Christians across the country. Half were asked, "Do you believe that God, Jesus Christ and the Holy Ghost are three separate Beings, or are they three Beings in one body or substance?"

Twenty-seven percent responded similar to the Mormon belief that they are separate beings. Sixty-six percent answered in line with traditional Christian beliefs that they are "three beings in one body or substance."

The other half of Christians surveyed were given a different question about the Trinity: "The New Testament says that God, Jesus Christ and the Holy Ghost are one. Do you believe that means they are one in purpose or one in body?"

This time the answers went the other direction. Those answering the traditional "one in body" were 31 percent. Those answering "one in purpose" were 58 percent.

Lawrence said that Mormons say the oneness of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the New Testament is an oneness of purpose. The positive response of Christians to this concept in the second question surprised Lawrence. "I was wondering if there was a difference. I wasn't expecting a flip-flop. But it was. It just shifts from two-to-one one way and almost two-to-one the other way," Lawrence said.

What caused the shift? Lawrence said it is in the way the questions were asked.

The first question focused on contrasting separateness and oneness — "separate beings" versus "three beings in one body or substance."

The second question focused on the meaning of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit's oneness — a physical (or metaphysical) oneness versus a purpose oneness.

"If it is presented in the way Mormons interpret scripture versus the opposite, they come toward the Mormon view," Lawrence said. "If you focus on physical characteristics, you get another one." — Courtesy of the [Deseret News](#)

The confusion over how to interpret the creeds is still with us, and it was definitely present in the 1830s. The accepted definition of the Trinity did not arrive until centuries after the Crucifixion, and only then after a great deal of heated – and even on occasion bloody – disagreements. The biblical verses used to support it are in no way self-evident. As my mission president Joseph Fielding McConkie used to say, without any additional information, you could easily read the Bible from now

until the Millennium and never have it occur to you that Jesus is his own father.

I offer all that to suggest that Joseph's thinking on the Trinity very likely did evolve, but not in the way you imply. That is to say, he likely didn't fully understand that believing in the Father and the Son as separate physical beings required you to simultaneously *not* believe they were separate physical beings. The Trinity is a logical impossibility, and it probably wasn't until the Church started to attract attention that Joseph grasped the implications of how heretical his position really was.

But as to these verses, why were they changed? Nobody knows for sure. My guess is that they sounded too Catholic for Joseph's taste, not necessarily Trinitarian. The phrase "mother of God" is uniquely Catholic and carries doctrinal implications that would likely have made Joseph uncomfortable, Trinitarians notwithstanding. All the other changes are in close textual proximity to that first one, so Joseph probably wanted to make sure this passage remained consistent. The changes really don't change the doctrine – Jesus is both God and Son of God, after all, and Trinitarians fully accept that – and they seem to clarify the issue in a way that puts distance between the Mormons and the Catholics.

Of course, to accept that Joseph could make such changes is to accept that he could have made an error during the translation process, or that he may have made an error with this change, which, as I've repeatedly pointed out, is not hard for me to accept at all. That may have come as a shock to you, but, again, that introduction that warns about "the mistakes of men" has been in print for almost two hundred years, so it's pretty hard to say the Church has been covering up the possibility of error.

The following verses are among many verses still in the Book of Mormon that hold a Trinitarian view of the Godhead:

Alma 11:38-39:

38: Now Zeezrom saith again unto him: Is the Son of God the very Eternal Father?

39: And Amulek said unto him: Yea, he is the very Eternal Father of heaven and of earth, and all things which in them are; he is the beginning and the end, the first and the last;

Mosiah 15:1-4:

1: And now Abinadi said unto them: I would that ye should understand that God himself shall come down among the children of men, and shall redeem his people.

2: And because he dwelleth in flesh he shall be called the Son of God, and having subjected the flesh to the will of the Father, being the Father and the Son –

3: The Father, because he was conceived by the power of God; and the Son, because of the flesh; thus becoming the Father and Son –

4: And they are one God, yea, the very Eternal Father of heaven and of earth.

Ether 3:14-15:

14: Behold, I am he who was prepared from the foundation of the world to redeem my people. **Behold, I am Jesus Christ. I am the Father and the Son.** In me shall all mankind have life, and that eternally, even they who shall believe on my name; and they shall become my sons and my daughters.

15: And never have I showed myself unto man whom I have created, for never has man believed in me as thou hast. Seest thou that ye are created after mine own image? Yea, even all men were created in the

beginning after mine own image. (Emphasis added).

Mosiah 16:15:

15: Teach them that redemption cometh through Christ the Lord, who is the very Eternal Father. Amen.”

Yes, and these verses take the bottom out from under your argument. If Joseph’s purpose in altering 1 Nephi was to purge Trinitarianism from the Book of Mormon, why would he leave these untouched? Also, you left out a big one from your list. The same title page that announces the Book of Mormon is not inerrant also says the purpose of the Book of Mormon is “to the convincing of the Jew and Gentile that JESUS is the CHRIST, the ETERNAL GOD, manifesting himself unto all nations.” [Caps in original]

Again, there it is, right on the first page. The verses you quote, coupled with the announcement of its purpose, make it clear Christ is God and that he is the Eternal Father as well as the Son, and it does so more explicitly than the verses Joseph changed. Even if he somehow forgot about all these other verses – highly unlikely - surely he wouldn’t let that Trinitarian title page hang out there like a big steaming matso ball, would he? In addition, the Doctrine and Covenants makes no attempt to shy away from these doctrines – several revelations begin by announcing that it is the Father speaking, and they end in the name of Jesus Christ.

What’s going on?

The answer, paradoxically, is that these verses are no more intrinsically Trinitarian than the changes are un-Trinitarian.

The Trinity relies on extra-Biblical creedal language to interpret scripture. In other words, one has to learn from creedal texts outside the Bible that God doesn’t make any sense at all and then graft that interpretation on the scripture after the fact. The plain meaning of the text will not automatically guide you to that bizarre conclusion. So these verses are consistent with Bible verses that make similar pronouncements, and no one, including Joseph Smith, has to apply the external Trinitarian lens to read them correctly.

After all, Jesus stated that “this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.” (John 17:3) If our eternal life depends on us knowing God, how can we do that if he’s incomprehensible?

That verse comes from what I believe to be the most profoundly spiritual chapter in all of scripture. John 17, the Great Intercessory Prayer, offers the solution. It provides the clearest possible understanding of what God means when he says he is the Father and the Son, and it does so in what seems to me to be explicitly Mormon terms:

John 17: 20-23

20 Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word;

21 That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.

22 And the glory which thou gavest me I have given them; that they may be one, even as we are one:

23 I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one; and that the world may know that thou hast sent me, and hast loved them, as thou hast loved me.

So we're all supposed to be one, just as Christ and his father are one. Do we imagine that involves all of us becoming the same person? To be saved, does Jeremy Runnells have to become Jim Bennett and become Jesus Christ, too? Are we all to be some giant blobular God together, and yet be somehow also separate at the same time?

As Paul would say, Heaven forbid! This is a unity of purpose Christ is talking about, not an esoteric Trinitarian paradox. These verses in the Book of Mormon, and similar-sounding verses in the Bible, are teaching the essential nature of unity. To paraphrase BYU professor Robert Millet, they're to teach us that the Father and the Son are infinitely more alike than they are separate. I think we often overcorrect in the Church and go out of our way to emphasize their distinct physical forms and lose sight of their innate and magnificent spiritual unity. These verses remain in order to teach us a profound lesson that we overlook at our spiritual peril.

When I teach this doctrine, I liken it to children who try to play one parent off the other. Kids often hold out hope that if Mom says no, maybe they can convince Dad to say yes. A perfectly united marriage wouldn't have this problem, as the mother would be able to perfectly speak for the father, and vice versa.

In the Godhead, Jesus's agenda is identical to the Father's agenda – you can't play one off of the other. So when people read scriptures and ask, "well, is this the Father or the Son speaking," Jesus's answer is – doesn't matter in the least. We speak for each other without the slightest deviation. I am so in line with the Father that I can speak for the Father, in the first person as the Father, as if I were the Father.

That's what Christ expects from us – to become one, to have His agenda be our agenda, for all of to be perfectly united and "knit together in love." It's a beautiful doctrine, and, at its core, astonishingly simple, as opposed to the Trinity, which is ridiculously complex and impossible to understand.

LDS scholar, Boyd Kirkland, made the following observation:

"The Book of Mormon and early revelations of Joseph Smith do indeed vividly portray a picture of the Father and Son as the same God...why is it that the Book of Mormon not only doesn't clear up questions about the Godhead which have raged in Christianity for centuries, but on the contrary just adds to the confusion? This seems particularly ironic, since a major avowed purpose of the book was to restore lost truths and end doctrinal controversies caused by the "great and abominable Church's" corruption of the Bible...In later years he [Joseph] reversed his earlier efforts to completely 'monotheise' the godhead and instead 'tritheised' it." – LDS scholar, Boyd Kirkland, "An Evolving God"

I googled Boyd Kirkland, and all I came up with was [a Wikipedia article](#) about "an [American television director](#) of animated [cartoons](#). He was best known for his work on [X-Men Evolution](#)." So I googled him again, adding the word "Mormon" to the search, and the same article popped up. Sure enough, under his biographical information, it points out that he was a Mormon who wrote articles about controversial issues. To twice reference him as an "LDS Scholar," however, implies some kind of unique authority or

academic status that he didn't have – his educational background is a B.S. in business administration from Weber State, and he was an animator by profession. He's no more an "LDS scholar" than I am – he was an unofficial critic to counter us unofficial apologists.

Sad to read that he passed away at age 60. Far too young.

Again, he's welcome to his opinion, as are you, but I don't see any need to agree with either, and I don't think his argument necessarily carries any more weight than anyone else's. Although I'm thrilled that he was, in fact, the "producer for [*Attack of the Killer Tomatoes: The Animated Series*](#)," which may well be the greatest thing I've ever heard.

Attack of the Killer Tomatoes!

Attack of the Killer Tomatoes!

They'll beat you, bash you,

Squish you, smash you

Serve you up for brunch

And finish you off

For dinner or lunch!

Assuming that the official 1838 First Vision account is truthful and accurate, why would Joseph Smith hold a Trinitarian view of the Godhead if he personally saw God the Father and Jesus Christ as separate and embodied beings a few years earlier in the Sacred Grove?

I don't think he would or did hold a Trinitarian view. I don't think these verses, both the changed and unchanged ones, suggest otherwise. Again, it's very hard to "hold a Trinitarian view" in practical terms anyway, and a good deal of people who call themselves Trinitarians actually think of God in very Mormon terms because the Trinity, by definition, makes no sense at all.

To sum up, "Nuns on the Run" should be required viewing for all seminary students, as long as they cut out the nude scene in the girl's locker room.

Book of Mormon Translation Concerns & Questions:

Unlike the story I've been taught in Sunday School, Priesthood, General Conferences, Seminary, EFY, Ensigns, Church history tour, Missionary Training Center, and BYU...Joseph Smith used a [rock in a hat](#) for translating the Book of Mormon.

What did they teach you in Sunday School, Priesthood, General Conferences, Seminary, EFY, etc.? In my experience, there was some discussion about the Urim and Thummim, which were, in fact, used during the process, although it's true that the rock in the hat never came up. But, for the most part, no one really brought up any real specifics about the process, which means that, once again, in the absence of solid information, speculation fills in the gaps. I think each of us had different ideas about the process and never thought to question our assumptions. I don't recall hearing any official rejection of the rock in the hat taught in any of the places you cite. And if you did, I would think you'd be able to provide a link to a manual or article that explicitly rejected the rock in the hat idea.

Ironically, the first time I heard the rock-in-the hat story was on my mission, when Joseph Fielding McConkie, son of Bruce R. and grandson of Joseph Fielding Smith, quoted David Whitmer on the

subject and claimed that Whitmer didn't know what he was talking about. Whitmer's account about the process came decades later, after Joseph Smith's death, and J.F. McConkie, taking a position he attributed to his father and grandfather, insisted it couldn't have been that way, because reading words off a seer stone seemingly contradicts [D&C 9](#), which is the only contemporaneous document on the subject that we have. D&C 9 chastises Oliver Cowdery for his translation attempt because he "took no thought save it was to ask" the Lord rather than trying to "study it out in [his] mind." So if the rock in the hat idea wasn't widely disseminated, which it wasn't, it may have been because there was significant disagreement among the Brethren as to its veracity, with President Smith and Elder McConkie on the side that (probably incorrectly) maintained it was nonsense.

(I wish I had some kind of link for you, but I don't. I do know that J.F. McConkie gave recorded speeches on this that were at one time sold by Deseret Book, but [since his passing in 2013](#), all his stuff is out of print.)

Joseph Smith himself dodged questions about specifics of the translation process, saying only that it was accomplished "by the gift and power of God" and that it "was not intended to tell the world all the particulars of the coming forth of the book of Mormon." That was largely the extent of the official story I heard until the Church published [its essay on the Book of Mormon translation](#).

In other words, he used the same "Ouija Board" that he used in his days treasure hunting where he would put in a rock – or a peep stone – in his hat and put his face in the hat to tell his customers the location of buried treasure.

Those are some other words, all right. How is a stone the same thing as a Ouija Board? Have you ever seen Ouija Boards? They don't look like rocks in a hat.

He used the exact same method while the gold plates were covered or put in another room or buried in the woods during translating the Book of Mormon. These facts are not only confirmed in *Rough Stone Rolling* (p. 71-72), by FairMormon [here](#) and [here](#), by [Neal A. Maxwell Institute](#) (FARMS), but also in [an obscure 1992 talk given by Elder Russell M. Nelson of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles](#). Update: The Church's [December 2013 essay admits this](#).

It admits is that the translation process included the rock in the hat method, but, contrary to the implication you're making, it was not the exclusive method. From the Church's essay:

*Nevertheless, the scribes and others who observed the translation left numerous accounts that give insight into the process. **Some accounts indicate that Joseph studied the characters on the plates.** Most of the accounts speak of Joseph's use of the Urim and Thummim (either the interpreters or the seer stone), and many accounts refer to his use of a single stone.* [Emphasis added]

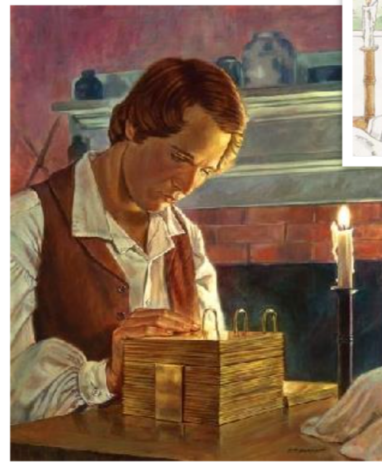
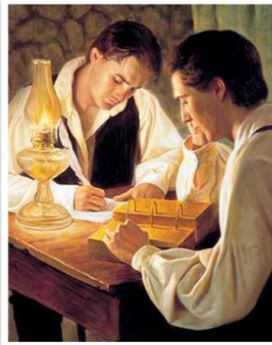
The fact that both "unofficial" apologists like FAIR, quasi-official apologists like BYU, respected Mormon scholars like Bushman, and entirely official apologists like Elder Nelson openly acknowledge the seer stone in the hat make it hard to argue that the church was actively engaged in "deception," to use your word. We'll talk more about it after looking at the pictures you provide.

Book of Mormon translation that the Church portrays to its members:



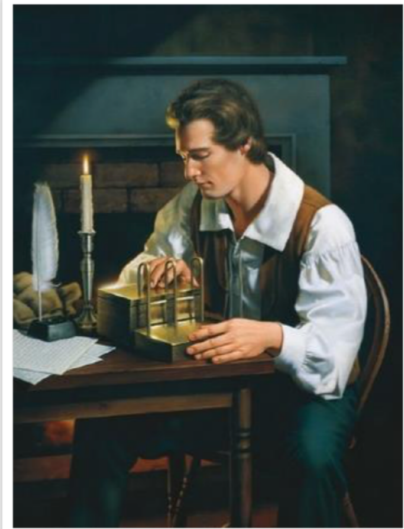
Joseph began to translate the writing on the gold plates. Joseph did not know what the writing meant. God helped him. Joseph used the Urim and Thummim to understand the words. We can read what he translated. It is called the Book of Mormon.

Joseph Smith—History 1:62

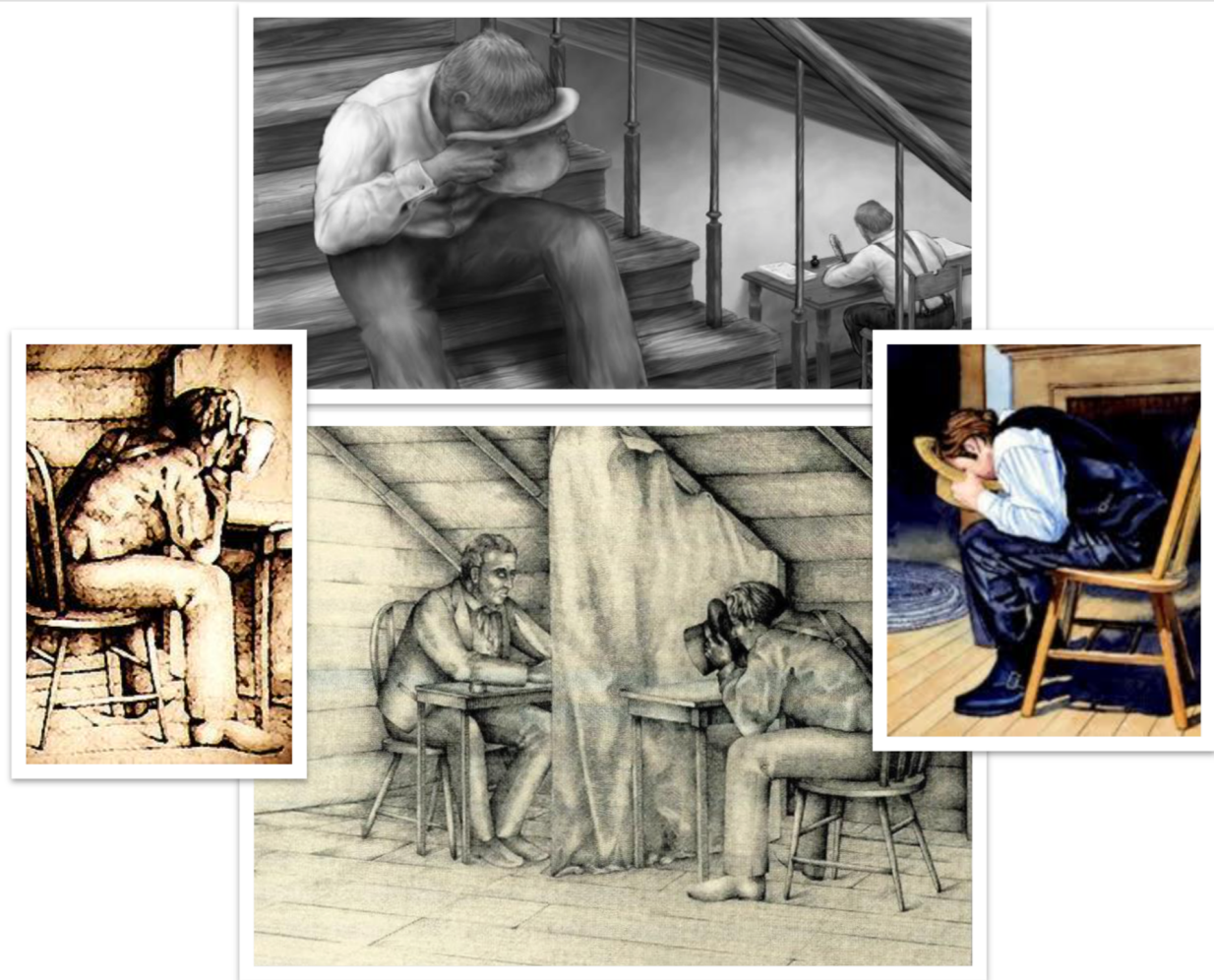


In Pennsylvania, Joseph began to translate the writing on the gold plates. He did not know what the writing meant, but when he used the Urim and Thummim, God helped him understand the words.

Joseph Smith—History 1:62



Book of Mormon translation as it actually happened:



Actually, there are a number of inaccuracies in this second group of pics, too. Which hat did he use – the straw hat in the far right, the top hat in the bottom center, or the cowboy hat in the top center? The one on the far left looks like it has some kind of feather in it.

Those are quibbles, of course. The second group of pictures is undoubtedly more historically accurate than the first. Although many of the first group of pics can be interpreted as being consistent with the reports that Joseph, at least occasionally, “studied the characters on the plates.” I especially like the one on the top left, which shows Joseph wearing the breastplate and using the Urim and Thummim, something that witnesses insist was a part of the translation process, at least early on. (Looks weird, though doesn’t it?) But the two showing Joseph and Oliver with the plates in full view are clearly wrong, as all accounts say that the plates were hidden from Oliver’s view at all times during translation. Although I’ve always wondered what resources Oliver had at his disposal when he attempted to translate. Was he only given a stone and a hat? Maybe just his rod, which you complain about later? Wouldn’t it have been likely that he’d insist on having the plates, too? We’ll probably never know how that worked.

Why is the Church not being honest and transparent to its members about how Joseph Smith really translated the Book of Mormon? How am I supposed to be okay with this deception?

You call *those* paintings “deception?” Brother, you haven’t seen nuthin’ yet. Let me show you some *real* deception in Mormon art.

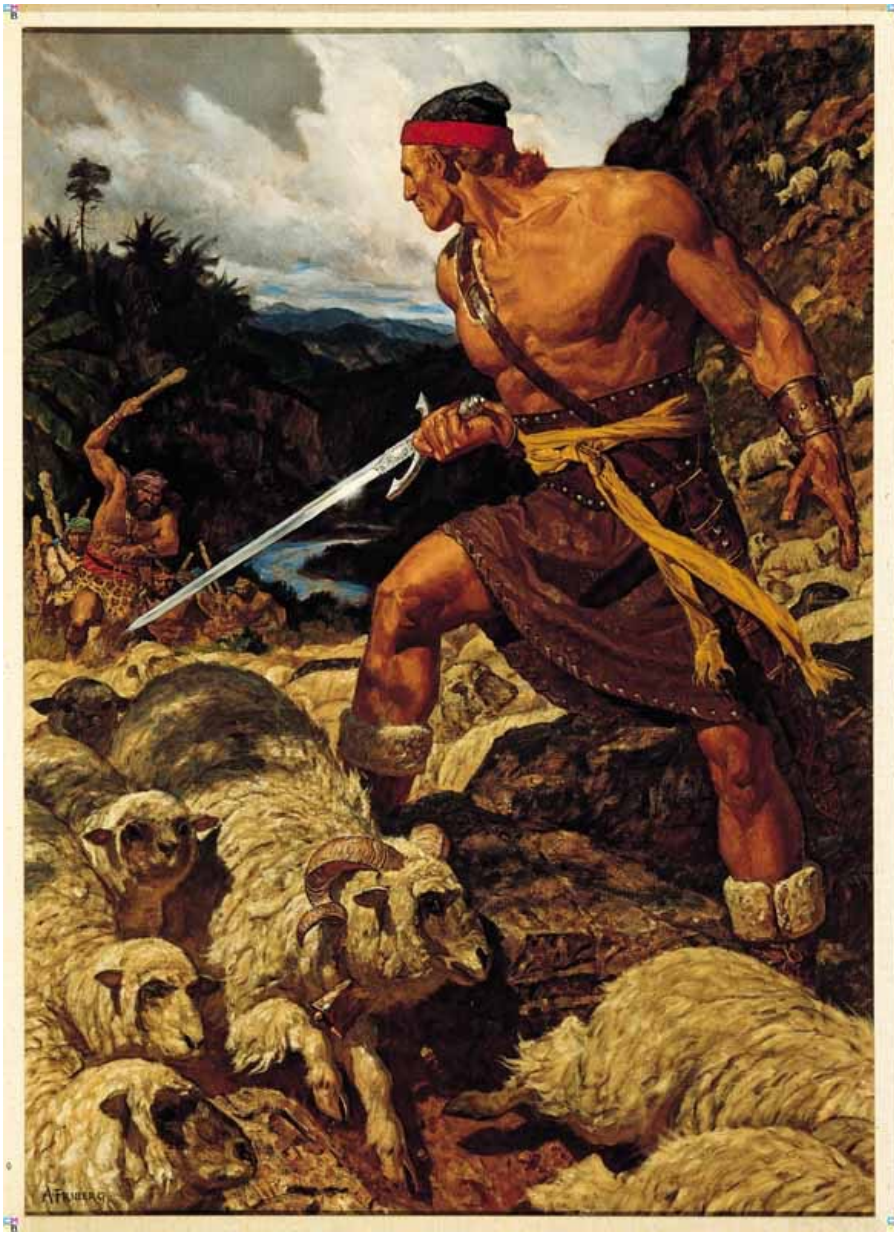
Witness “Abinadi before King Noah” by Arnold Friberg, which has appeared in every edition of the Book of Mormon in my lifetime.



I’m pretty sure that just about everything about this picture is wrong, from Abinadi’s ripped physique/six-pack to the weird fez things the priests are wearing, but, especially, to Noah’s pet leopards. Where’d he get the leopards? Aren’t they African? How’d they get to America? How did he domesticate them? Do they share a litter box?

[Note: Since first writing this, I found [an interview with Friberg](#) where he states these are jaguars, not leopards, which, alas, undermines my point, as, according to the [infallible Wikipedia](#), jaguars are “the only [extant](#) *Panthera* species native to the Americas.” So Noah could conceivably have had jaguars. Although, really, no, he couldn’t. The Book of Mormon says nothing about jaguars, and people don’t have pet jaguars, even if they’re kings. Again, how did he domesticate them? Do they share a litter box?]

Here’s Friberg’s depiction of Ammon:



Those pecs! Those biceps! Man, they had good gyms back in ancient America, as well as funny looking hats. But guess what? All research we have suggests what they didn't have is domesticated sheep. In fact, the Book of Mormon never mentions sheep in connection with Ammon, who was defending the king's "flocks," but never says what animals were in those flocks. In my daughter's Book of Mormon class at BYU her freshman year, the teacher made a convincing argument that these were flocks of *turkeys*. Turkeys, of all things! Yet here Friberg paints a bunch of sheep, or, at the very least, the hairiest turkeys I've ever laid eyes on.

Or howsabout Friberg's stripling warriors?



Again with the zero percent body fat! Didn't the Nephites have access to carbs?

And there's our friend Helaman, leading his troops on horseback.

Wait a minute. On *horseback*? As we established earlier, nobody rode a single horse in the Book of Mormon. Nobody rode anything, not even a tapir. And why does Helaman get a horse while making all his troops walk on foot? What a jerk. Fortunately, I'm pretty sure this isn't how it happened.

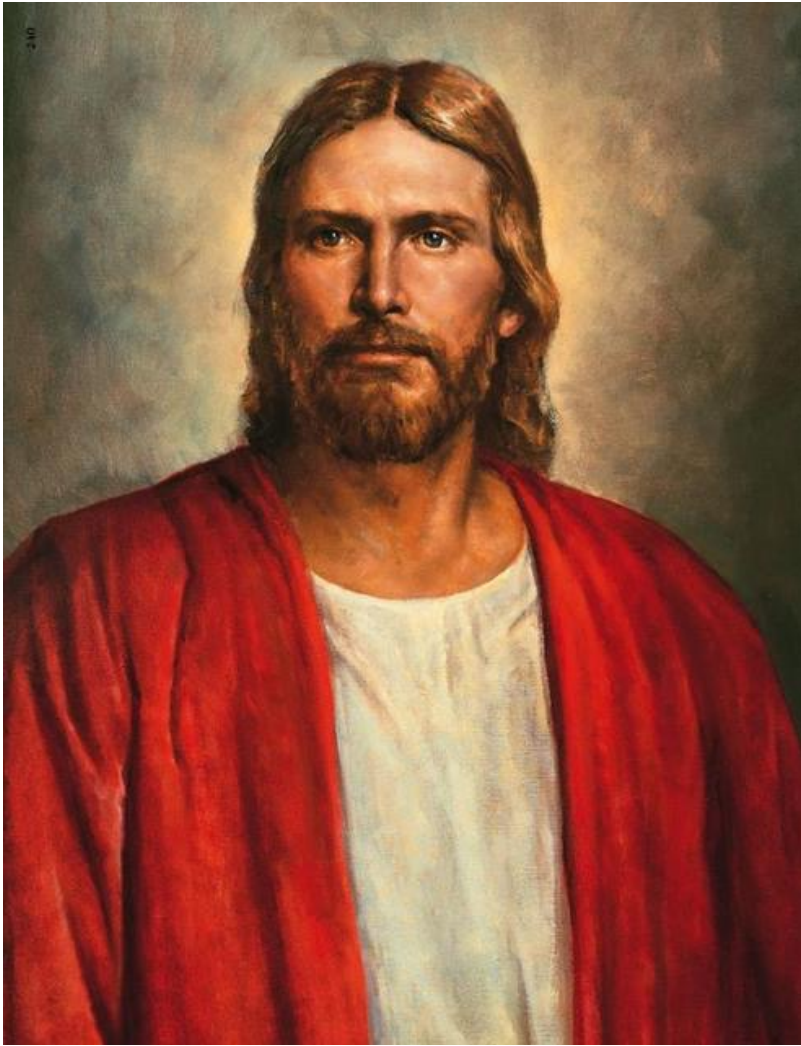
And on it goes.

The fact is that religious art has a very long history of inaccuracy, in and out of the church. It's undeniable, for instance, that a Jewish fellow born just over two thousand years ago in Bethlehem wouldn't grow up to look anything like this:



This blonde, pale, delicate-featured blue-eyed waif looks more likely to be the lead singer of ABBA than anyone with a drop of Middle Eastern blood in their veins. Yet pictures like this one have been the dominant artistic depictions of Christ for centuries, and long before Joseph Smith came along.

And, to be fair, I don't think Mormon depictions of Christ do it much better. In every chapel, you can't help but come face to face with this guy:



I love that he's standing in front of a background you'd find in a modern photography studio, as if he's posing for a senior portrait or something.

This seems to be the favored image of Jesus among most Mormons, but I confess I've never liked it at all. This doesn't look like a kind and loving savior to me; it looks like a cross between a young Grizzly Adams and a BYU football player, the kind of guy who would have probably beaten me up back in middle school. Did Jesus work out at Arnold Friberg's gym, too?

While we're at it, let's talk Christmas for a moment. You do realize that every nativity scene on display in every home is terribly, hopelessly, and woefully wrong, right? Mary and Joseph were poor people taking shelter in a dirty, stinky cave they shared with livestock, and they had to put their baby in a filthy pig trough, probably stepping through piles of poop to get there. Every nativity set I've seen shows a well-dressed couple in a rustic wooden cabin that's entirely poop-free.

The Three Wise Men, who are always beatifically swooning over the child as the shepherds stand back in awe, didn't arrive until at least a year after the birth, and, in fact, we don't know if there were, in fact, three of them. There may have been two; there may have been a dozen or more. But tradition says three, so that's how many strike a contorted swooning pose in deceptive plastic figurines that are hauled out of the attic in every Christian home during the month of December. And if your kids are anything like my kids, the figures all get rearranged and stuck in weird places, and maybe Luke Skywalker or

My Little Pony end up making an appearance in the stable sometime along the way.

I also want to share a story with you that doesn't really help my point here, but it does give some insight into where the Brethren are coming from on this.

I once had a meeting with a high-level church employee, and we had a very interesting conversation that included the following story:

It seems that, on one occasion, the Church commissioned an artist to paint a depiction of the First Vision. In this case, the artist did a considerable amount of research, and he determined that, back in the early 19th Century, a 14 year-old impoverished farmboy who went out into the woods to pray would almost certainly have been barefoot at the time. That makes sense – shoes were expensive, after all, and wearing them outside while working crops in the Spring would likely have been ridiculously extravagant and probably uncomfortable to boot.

So the artist painted his shoelessly and historically accurate portrayal of the First Vision, turned it into the Church, and found himself in the center of a controversy he had not anticipated, but which I'm sure you've guessed.

The Church wanted to know where Joseph's shoes were.

The artists began by patiently explaining his research and conclusion, but it didn't matter. The Church was unwilling to accept the painting as is. They insisted that the artist paint some suitable footwear, and the artist refused. One of the members of the committee suggested a compromise – that Joseph be depicted in a position where his feet would not be visible. The artist was unwilling to do that, either, and he ended up rejecting the commission altogether and withdrawing the painting. I have no idea what happened after that – I don't know if he left the Church or if he just chalked it all up to experience and sucked it up, but I am interested in the questions this thing raises.

First off, what would I do in this situation? The artist has a point, certainly, but with regard to my relationship with the Church, I doubt this would be the hill I would want to die on. I'd probably just accept the compromise option, paint Joseph with his feet hidden, and recognize that the focal point of the painting shouldn't necessarily be 19th Century podiatry.

But it has to be asked: why on earth should the Church care? Who are they protecting? What member of the Church is going to be offended by the idea of a barefoot prophet?

This is a problem of cultural groupthink more than deliberate deception.

I once asked a high-ranking mucky-muck on the Church's Temple Committee why we didn't see more original, interesting art in temples instead of the prints of prints of Harry Anderson and Del Parson magazine illustrations that you see everywhere else. His answer was that every piece of art that is approved to hang in temples has to go through umpteen layers of committee approval, and particularly with any portrayal of the Savior, it's almost impossible to get consensus. So that's why we stick with the tried and true – and boring.

Which is sad, really. Harry Anderson's paintings are the ones that are used more often than any others, and the guy was a Seventh-Day Adventist! Can't we rely on homegrown artists for a change?

Back to the main point, which is that religious art isn't now and, really, never has been about historical accuracy. Like all art, it's largely about evoking an emotional response by telling a story in a single static image, even if it has to take "artistic license" to do so. An image of Joseph poring over the plates by candlelight is evocative, and it tells a story that helps people feel an emotional connection to the translation process. An image of Joseph with his face in a hat just looks like he's throwing up.

That's not to say that excuses the fact that the art you provide is misleading and inaccurate, as it is definitely both of those things. But it's noteworthy that the only way you can demonstrate that the church has been deliberately deceptive is to produce pieces of art, not actual false statements. Art is seldom, if ever, truly accurate, and every painting of the First Vision has Joseph Smith in shoes.

But if the Book of Mormon itself isn't infallible, why should we expect Arnold Friberg to be?

The Church, to my knowledge, has never denied the rock in the hat; they've just chosen not to talk about it because it's weird and embarrassing. Like you, I think that's the wrong choice, and that bringing the weird, embarrassing bits of our history out in to the open is a much better approach. Thankfully, it's the approach that the Church is starting to take. Although, like you, I believe there's a lot more they can and should do on that score in the days ahead.

First Vision Concerns & Questions:

"Our whole strength rests on the validity of that [First] vision. It 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."

– Gordon B. Hinckley, [The Marvelous Foundation of Our Faith](#)

- . There are at least 4 different First Vision accounts by Joseph Smith:

[1832 account](#)

[Two 1835 accounts](#)

[1838 account \(official version\)](#)

[1842 account](#)

I have sympathy for a number of your issues, as some of them I found troubling when I first learned about them, too. But for the life of me, I cannot empathize with any degree of concern about the different accounts of the First Vision. I don't know when I discovered that there were different accounts, as the information was completely untroubling to me.

I think it may have been on my mission, because we repeatedly showed the movie "The First Vision," complete with Joseph throwing a handful of seeds in the air, and the narration of the movie drew from both the 1838 account and the 1842 Wentworth Letter, and I wanted to know where the non-1838 language had come from. This was in a pre-Internet world, and I would only have had access to official church stuff. I found an article, probably in the Ensign, that compared the accounts, and my reaction

was along the lines of, “Oh, okay. So that’s where that stuff came from.” It didn’t occur to me that I should find this the least bit troubling. (It may be the 1832 account wasn’t in that piece – that’s the only one with anything that could be taken as a significant contradiction with the other accounts. We’ll get to that when you do later in your letter.)

You’ve heard the standard apologetic line, I’m sure – i.e. Joseph was writing for different audiences and therefore emphasizing different elements of the same experience – but to drive this point home in a way that would feel less like a FAIR article, I wanted to personalize it a bit.

I’ve been writing a blog for almost nine years now – has it really been that long? Wow! – and I cover a wide variety of topics. The Church comes up, of course, as do politics and pop culture, along with esoterically weird topics like the identity of William Shakespeare. (I believe William Shakespeare [was a pseudonym](#) of Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford. Please don’t hold that against me.)

Yet over the course of almost a decade, on only one occasion on my blog have I recorded a “mission story” from beginning to end. I did it early in the blog’s history – the first week, in fact. The story is not one of earth-shaking significance. I just think it’s pretty funny, and, to me, it illustrates the daily sorts of absurdities that missionaries have to deal with, and it humanizes my mission experience in a way I find delightful. Yes, it’s light and silly, but I can’t count the number of times I’ve told it over the years in all kinds of settings – in many conversations, in Sunday School lessons, even from the pulpit. It makes for a great icebreaker before talking about truly spiritual things – a good joke to tell before you get into the meat of your talk.

So [here’s the story, as I recorded it online on August 19, 2007](#), a little more than 18 years after these events take place:

A Religious Treatise

A Sunday blog entry requires some deep religious treatise, which calls to mind my Mormon missionary days in the land of Scotland lo these many years ago. I was training a new missionary in the paradise known as Drumchapel, a Glasgow slum where a guy sold drugs out of his sweetie van and the nighttime sky was aglow with flames from burning cars in the middle of the street. Needless to say, it was a pretty rough area, and the church building was right in the worst part of town. Missionaries dreaded being assigned to “The Drum,” and the office had even changed the name of the area to “Milngavie” to soften the blow of being condemned to the gulag of the Scotland Edinburgh Mission. It turned out to be no worse than any other place in Scotland. No matter where I was, the omnipresent rain always soaked me to the bone as I knocked on doors for ten to twelve hours a day. It wasn’t really that cold, but I was always wet, so there was no way to truly keep warm.

One day, my companion and I were invited in to the home of a church member after a long day of slogging through the streets, and he let us sit next to his freshly-lit coal fire in the living room. It was fairly late in the day, and the stifling warmth of the room was intoxicating. It also made it next to impossible for me to keep my eyes open.

We sat and listened patiently as he rambled on and on about something or other, and my mind started to wander. He wasn't expecting either of us to speak, which was a welcome relief, but I also started to panic as my eyelids started to droop, and once the drooping begins, there's no way to snap back into full consciousness. There are some techniques that produce some positive results, like tightening your sphincter as hard as you can, but their effects are only temporary. I struggled valiantly to stay alert, but I knew it was a lost cause. I'm not sure if I nodded off completely, but at some point in the middle of the conversation, I felt it necessary to make the following announcement:

"I have a cousin with Down Syndrome."

I said this apropos of nothing, interrupting the church member in mid-ramble. Everyone in the room stopped and looked at me, which startled me back into the real world. My companion was aghast. I was aghast. It was an entirely inappropriate thing to say, and I wasn't, at the time, even sure if it was true.

But, on the plus side, at least I was wide awake.

All right, story over.

It just so happens that I anal-retentively wrote in my missionary journal every single day of my mission. My father, at the time, was the president of the company that is now FranklinCovey, so of course I had one of those ubiquitous Franklin Day Planners, which was little more than a glorified page-length calendar in a leather binder. Every day from September 2, 1987 to September 21, 1989 has at least a page-length entry, and some are even longer. I kept a pretty meticulous record which could probably come in quite handy if someone needed to prosecute me for anything I did between late 1987 and late 1989.

So as I tried to think of a response to your First Vision concerns, I thought I'd dig through my journals, specifically the three months in early 1989 when I served my time in the Drum. I thought it might be helpful to see how the 1989 Jim Bennett and 2007 Jim Bennett recorded the same event in different versions separated by a long period of time.

But here's the problem: this didn't make it into my missionary journal at all!

I was genuinely surprised by this. I checked and double-checked, but there's no hint of the story anywhere. Given how much emphasis I had placed on this story since I'd come home, I couldn't imagine that this wouldn't have merited at least a single sentence along the lines of "Almost fell asleep in a member's house today – yikes!" But as I read the journal, I realize that goofy 1989 Jim Bennett thought that what ought to be recorded more than anything else was his stupid *feelings*. There are a whole lot of entries where that dumb kid gives whole entries about "Woke up discouraged, but that just told me I needed to exercise more faith. I'm always happier when I trust in the Lord..." blah blah and blah.

I also spend a lot of time bearing my testimony to myself and way way WAY too much time mooning over the girl who dumped me right after I got home. All of that now is completely useless to me. As I sat there and I read through it, only snippets of actual events pierced the emotional weather report, and,

even then, they were usually just catalysts for more emotional navel gazing – “So and so seemed upset with me tonight at the fireside, and I felt intimidated and insecure...” I don’t care what you *felt*, you dork! What fireside? Why on earth would I waste my time writing about being intimidated and insecure? Why did I think I would want to look back on all my post-adolescent mood swings, all of which sound drearily the same as they’re recorded over the space of twenty-four months? Maybe this wouldn’t have been useful in a court of law after all.

But the absence of this story demonstrates my point. When I tell this story over two decades after it happened, I do so because it constitutes one of my most precious mission memories. But it was so unimportant to me at the time that I didn’t even bother to record it in my meticulous daily journal. Using your logic, you could easily make the case that the story must not have actually happened – *if this was such a big deal to me, why is there no written record of it until 2007?*

We’ll likely return to this as we move on through your First Vision objections.

2. No one - including Joseph Smith's family members and the Saints – had ever heard about the First Vision for twelve to twenty-two years after it supposedly occurred. The first and earliest written account of the First Vision in Joseph Smith's journal was written 12 years after the spring of 1820. There is absolutely no record of a First Vision prior to 1832.

There’s a clear logical fallacy at work here. Specifically, your first sentence in this paragraph is in no way proven by your second and third sentences. Even if 1832 constitutes the first time there’s any written record of the event, that doesn’t mean that no one had ever heard about the First Vision until Joseph finally took pen to paper twelve years after it happened. If all people know is what they have written down, then most of us don’t know anything at all.

So why would there be no written record of the First Vision until 1832? Joseph gives some clear clues on that score in the 1838 account, which is canonized scripture in the LDS Church.

Beginning with Verse 20 of [Joseph Smith History](#) from the Pearl of Great Price:

When the light had departed, I had no strength; but soon recovering in some degree, I went home. And as I leaned up to the fireplace, mother inquired what the matter was.

Here it is - the first opportunity for Joseph to unburden himself of this great secret, and to the person to whom he was closer than anyone else in the world, the one person more likely than any other to believe his astonishing tale – and what does Joseph do?

I replied, “Never mind, all is well—I am well enough off.” I then said to my mother, “I have learned for myself that Presbyterianism is not true.”

Reticence to share was his initial reaction, which is not at all surprising when we remember that we’re talking about 14-year-old kid here, one who has just experienced something overwhelmingly difficult to process. And events shortly thereafter would make him even more gun-shy about spreading the word.

He finally gets up the courage to tell a Methodist minister about the vision, and the minister blows him

off “with great contempt” and makes him feel foolish for sharing it. He soon discovers that talking about the vision brings him nothing but trouble.

Verses 21 and 22:

I soon found, however, that my telling the story had excited a great deal of prejudice against me among professors of religion, and was the cause of great persecution, which continued to increase; and though I was an obscure boy, only between fourteen and fifteen years of age, and my circumstances in life such as to make a boy of no consequence in the world, yet men of high standing would take notice sufficient to excite the public mind against me, and create a bitter persecution; and this was common among all the sects—all united to persecute me.

It caused me serious reflection then, and often has since, how very strange it was that an obscure boy, of a little over fourteen years of age, and one, too, who was doomed to the necessity of obtaining a scanty maintenance by his daily labor, should be thought a character of sufficient importance to attract the attention of the great ones of the most popular sects of the day, and in a manner to create in them a spirit of the most bitter persecution and reviling. But strange or not, so it was, and it was often the cause of great sorrow to myself.

So when bullies are mocking you for talking about seeing God, what do you do? You stop talking about it. Certainly your family stops talking about it. But that doesn’t stop others for making fun of you for it, which, according to Joseph, they did – and some of it even leaked over into records of the time.

There’s a tidbit from [*The Reflector*](#), a Palmyra newspaper that mocked the Mormons in February of 1831 for claiming that “Smith (they affirmed), had seen God frequently and personally.” Other possible earlier references pop up, too, although they’re more obscure than that. And, really, 1831 is just a year before 1832, so this doesn’t really move the needle much closer to a contemporaneous version. Why didn’t Joseph write something down about it at a time closer to his experience? Where’s the 1821 or 1822 account?

When you ask the question that way, you start to realize how shaky your premise is. The First Vision doesn’t appear in any 1821 or 1822 writings of Joseph Smith because *there are no 1821 or 1822 writings of Joseph Smith*. Joseph was 15 and 16 in 1821 and 1822, respectively, and he was, by his own description, “an obscure boy... of no consequence in the world” who was “doomed to the necessity of obtaining a scanty maintenance by his daily labor.” He was uneducated and essentially illiterate. He didn’t write anything down because he wasn’t capable of writing.

But those who were mocking and persecuting him weren’t all illiterate. Why don’t we have any contemporaneous accounts from them? After all, don’t most people make note in their journals all the scorn they heap on obscure boys of no consequence in the world? (“Dear Diary: Went back and teased that no-good Joseph Smith again today because he claims to have seen the Father and the Son in a vision, which, as we all know, violates Trinitarian doctrine..”) Don’t newspapers always publish investigative reports of the crackpot theories put forward by teenage day laborers? (Dateline: Palmyra, where obscure 15-year old Joseph Smith, a boy of no consequence in the world, has still not recanted his deistic blasphemies...) It isn’t until 1831 when *The Reflector* decides to throw in a First Vision-flavored jibe in its list of grievous sins against the Mormons, and the casual way it’s included in a laundry list of Mormon offenses suggests that the charge is nothing new, as if maybe people have been

talking about it for a long time.

From 1820 until 1827, when Joseph started making rumblings about golden plates, nobody anticipated that this worthless kid was going to found a major religious movement, so records about him vary between scarce and nonexistent. And prior to 1830, the only written items we have from Joseph are the revelations he received in connection to the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. In 1830, he receives a revelation, now [D&C Section 20](#), that there is to be a “record kept,” so that’s probably the first time he gets a sense that maybe he ought to be writing more stuff down.

That revelation also includes this nugget of info in verse 5:

After it was truly manifested unto this first elder[i.e Joseph Smith] that he had received a remission of his sins, he was entangled again in the vanities of the world;

And when was it “truly manifested unto” Joseph that he had received a remission of his sins? In the 1832 account, Joseph says this happened when the Lord appeared to him. Quoting Joseph from his 1832 account:

“I saw the Lord and he spake unto me saying Joseph my son thy sins are forgiven thee.”

That would make verse 5 an 1830 direct reference to the First Vision, which negates your contention that there are no references to the First Vision until 1832. The 1838 account actually corroborates the idea in verse 5 that after the vision, Joseph was “entangled again in the vanities of the world.” Rather than contradicting each other, the references and account of the First Vision are actually quite consistent, even though they don’t all reference the whole experience in every account.

So with an 1830 commandment to start keeping a record, Joseph begins the process of recording revelations, but he still doesn’t begin keeping a personal journal until 1832. And what’s one of the first things he writes about when he begins his personal history? The First Vision. That seems like an entirely reasonable timeline for discussion of the event.

Consider, for instance, that not only were there no written accounts of Joseph’s First Vision prior to 1832, there were no written accounts of anything in Joseph’s personal history. In the 1832 journal entry that constitutes the first account of the First Vision, he also states that he “was born in the town of Charon [Sharon] in the State of vermont North America on the twenty third day of December AD 1805.” Near as I can tell, this is the first time Joseph wrote about the date and place of his birth, and he waited until more than 26 years after the event to do it. So, using your logic, we should therefore presume that no one - including Joseph Smith's family members and the Saints – had ever heard about Joseph Smith’s birth until 26 years after it supposedly occurred.

3. In the 1832 account, Joseph said that before praying he knew that there was no true or living faith or denomination upon the earth as built by Jesus Christ in the New Testament. His primary purpose in going to prayer was to seek forgiveness of his sins.

4. In the official 1838 account, Joseph said his "object in going to inquire of the Lord was to know which of all the sects was right, that I might know which to join"..."(for at this time it had never entered

into my heart that all were wrong).”

This is in direct contradiction to his 1832 First Vision account.

Two issues raised here. One is the idea that in 1832 he says he already knew that all churches were false before praying, while in 1838 he said that “it had never entered into my heart that all were wrong,” which you posit constitutes a direct contradiction between the two accounts.

The other issue is Joseph’s purpose for praying – in 1832 he says it is to get his sins forgiven, while in 1838 he says it is “to know which of all the sects was right.” You insist that this, too constitutes a direct contradiction between the two accounts.

To adequately respond to the first issue, I think it’s helpful to begin by addressing the second issue and then circling back to the first with some additional context under our belts.

In the case of “Forgiveness of Sins v. Which Church is True,” FAIR and others maintain that this supposed discrepancy can be explained by the fact that Joseph, in fact, had two distinct items on his agenda when he knelt down to pray – 1. Which Church is the right one? and 2. As long as you’re at it, can I also get my sins forgiven while I’m here? As much as I respect FAIR, I don’t think that’s the right answer.

To understand why, we must, of course, turn to the uncorrelated wisdom of “Seinfeld.”

In the 130th Seinfeld episode titled “The Calzone,” which originally aired on April 25, 1996, Elaine makes a bet with a character named Todd Gack, with a free dinner put forward as the stakes. Todd says that Dustin Hoffman appeared in the movie “Star Wars;” Elaine says that’s nonsense. Elaine, of course, is correct, so she wins the bet, which means that Todd has to buy her dinner. Over the course of the episode, we learn that Todd has a system of making stupid bets with women in order to get them to go out with him without actually having to ask them for dates.

Todd Gack’s admittedly brilliant system is irrelevant to our discussion, but the “Star Wars” bet is not.

Even with a free dinner at stake, the impact of the bet’s outcome on Elaine’s life is insignificant. It’s a simple academic question, an empty exercise in curiosity. And the impact it has on her eternal salvation? None whatsoever.

True, even without a free dinner at stake, people engage in meaningless pop culture arguments like this all the time, sometimes getting quite heated about them. (“What do you mean Justin Timberlake was in NSYNC, you moron? Everyone knows he was one of the Backstreet Boys!”) But Google now provides instant resolution for most of them, and while the loser in the disagreement may be miffed for a moment or two, such incidents are, under most circumstances, quickly forgotten. (Although Justin Timberlake was, in fact, in NSYNC and not the Backstreet Boys. Google it if you don’t believe me.)

Turning back to the First Vision, saying that Joseph Smith had two different items on his agenda when he went to pray is to reduce the question about the which church is right to the equivalent of the status of Dustin Hoffman’s Jedi pedigree. Joseph wasn’t asking an academic question of idle curiosity; it was a question whose answer could be the difference between heaven and hell. Never mind dinner; in

Joseph's mind, his soul was at stake.

You see that in all of Joseph's firsthand accounts. "[M]y mind become seriously imprest with regard to the all important concerns of for the welfare of my immortal Soul," he wrote in 1832. "I considered it of the first importance that I should be right, in matters that involve eternal consequ[e]nces;" he wrote in 1835. "My mind was called up to serious reflection and great uneasiness... my feelings were deep and often poignant... What is to be done?" he wrote in 1838. "I began to reflect upon the importance of being prepared for a future [i.e. eternal] state," he wrote in 1842.

These are different words, to be sure, but there's no mistaking the commonality of their underlying meaning. I believe that all these accounts show that Joseph's deepest desire was to know what he had to do to be saved. That was the one and only item on his agenda in the Sacred Grove.

The question he asked, then, about which church he should join tells us about young Joseph's theological assumptions. It's clear in all accounts that salvation and church membership were inextricably linked in his mind. Even in 1832, where he doesn't specify what question he asked the Lord before his sins were forgiven, he goes on at great length about his concern for the error he sees in all the churches. If they could travel back in time, many modern religionists would counsel young Joseph that a relationship with Christ and forgiveness of sins can happen without belonging to any church whatsoever, but that possibility doesn't seem to occur to Joseph, nor would it have been likely to occur to anyone in the early 19th Century. Christ without a church in 1820? Who could imagine such heresy? Certainly not an illiterate farmboy who, at that point, had no inkling what the Lord had in store for him.

Why, then, did he ask which church to join? Because he thought he needed to belong to church to be saved from his sins. In Joseph's mind, "which church is the right one" and "how can I get my sins forgiven" were variations on the same theme, and only minor variations at that. Rather than show inconsistency, the two accounts are remarkably united in their depiction of Joseph's concern for his soul and his assumptions about what was necessary to save it.

So with that understanding, the apparent contradiction about whether or not he had decided that all the churches were wrong prior to praying becomes far less problematic. The 1832 account spends more time detailing the specific problems with all the churches than the 1838 account, indicating that Joseph still believed in the importance of joining a church to gain access to the atonement. True, he doesn't explicitly say that any church membership is necessary, but he didn't have to – those reading his account in 1832 would have had the same assumptions, and neither Joseph or his audience would have even considered the modern/post-modern idea of an effectual Christian life outside the boundaries of organized religion. Even if all the churches were wrong to one degree or another, surely Joseph would still have felt it necessary to join the best one – or the "most correct" one, to borrow a phrase from earlier in your letter and later in his life.

The other interesting thing about Joseph's 1838 statement that "it had never entered into my heart that all were wrong" is that, if you apply the kind of legalistic standard necessary to make those words some kind of indefensible contradiction of the 1832 account, you would then have to say they are also a contradiction of what he had to say *just eight verses earlier* in the 1838 account.

Verse 10 of Joseph Smith History:

In the midst of this war of words and tumult of opinions, I often said to myself: What is to be done? Who of all these parties are right; or, are they all wrong together? If any one of them be right, which is it, and how shall I know it?[Emphasis added]

What? He had previously considered the possibility that the churches could be “all wrong together?” But doesn’t he say just eight short verses later that “it had never entered into [his] heart that all were wrong?” Doesn’t this prove your point?

No, it reveals your assumptions, which are incorrect.

You approached this with the unspoken and unchallenged assumption that if the First Vision were true, every account of that vision would have to be identical, or at least close to identical, which is seldom, if ever, how people recount similar events over long spans of time. Furthermore, you erroneously assumed Joseph’s accounts would have to conform with your own modern understanding of religious culture that are at odds with the culture in which Joseph found himself. No reader in 1832 would have read Joseph’s emphasis on forgiveness of sins in that account as any kind of contradiction with a desire to know which church to join. They “knew,” or assumed, anyway, that forgiveness of sins couldn’t happen outside the boundaries of a church.

So how does one reconcile JSH 1:10 with JSH 1:18? The key phrase, I think, is “entered into my heart.” He had clearly intellectually considered the possibility all churches were in error in verse 10 (and in the 1832 account,) but the idea doesn’t really sink in – i.e. enter into his heart – until verse 18. I think all of us have had this experience – things happen that we choose not to believe even when we get the information, but we don’t allow our intellectual knowledge to “enter into our hearts.” I’m betting you probably had a similar experience in researching church history – you’d stumble upon a distressing fact and say to yourself “That can’t be true!” and, after a period of struggle, and perhaps even mourning, there finally comes acceptance. It enters in to your heart.

When that happens, we can all identify with Amulek from the Book of Mormon, who once said of his own testimony, “I knew concerning these things, yet I would not know.” ([Alma 10:6](#))

Make up your mind, Amulek! Did you know or didn’t you know?! That’s a direct contradiction!

5. Other problems:

The dates / his ages: The 1832 account states Joseph was 15 years old when he had the vision in 1821 while the other accounts state he was 14 years old in 1820 when he had the vision.

You are correct. Joseph’s incorrect age was written in by Frederick G. Williams as a marginal note above Joseph’s handwriting in the 1832 account. There’s no reason to assume it’s anything other than an honest mistake. If you’re expecting infallibility in the 1832 account, you’re in serious trouble. The grammar alone in that thing is truly atrocious.

The reason or motive for seeking divine help – Bible reading and conviction of sins, a revival, a desire to know if God exists, wanting to know which church to join – are not reported the same in each account.

Not to be rude, but this is a truly bizarre complaint with some very strange assumptions. In which account, for instance, does Joseph claim that he went into the woods to pray solely because of a revival? He also mentions his birthplace in both the 1832 and 1838 versions. Should this be interpreted as a claim that he was seeking divine help because he was born in Vermont? Because he left out his birthplace in the 1835 and 1842 versions, should we then presume that he couldn't really have been born in Vermont because this was not "reported the same in each account?"

You act as if these elements, all of which come into play at different times in the overall story, are all completely unrelated non sequiturs – in a previous version of your letter, you said they were "all over the map." No, "all over the map" would be one version where Joseph prayed because he was dared to by Hyrum, and another where he prayed because he thought that it would help him find buried treasure, and yet another where he thought prayer was the only way to ward off elephants. (Another mention of elephants! Could it be mere coincidence?)

Your elements aren't all over the map; they're all part of the same map, or at least different maps covering the same territory. Revivals lead to Bible reading, which leads to a desire to know more about God, which leads to a conviction of sins, which leads to a desire to know which church to join to be forgiven. All steps on the same journey; all plot points on the same map. True, some accounts/maps don't have all the same plots pointed in the other accounts/maps, but all the points are consistent across the accounts. The fact that different maps drawn at different times don't look like photocopies of each other shouldn't be surprising at all. Your map of the "lands of Joseph Smith's youth" don't have all the same points on them that other maps of the same territory do. Does that make either of those maps contradictory or fraudulent? Does it mean that Jacobsburg doesn't really exist?

Who appears to him – a spirit, an angel, two angels, Jesus, many angels, the Father and the Son – are all over the place.

Nonsense. One account only explicitly mentions one personage, and another mentions as an afterthought that angels were there, too. That's the sum total of any differences. Hardly all over the place.

The historical record shows that there was no revival in Palmyra in 1820. There was one in 1817 and there was another in 1824.

That may be why none of Joseph's First Vision accounts mention a revival.

There are records from his brother, William Smith, and his mother Lucy Mack Smith, both stating that the family joined Presbyterianism after Alvin's death in November 1823 despite Joseph Smith claiming in the official 1838 account that they joined in 1820; 3 years before Alvin Smith's death.

You'll have to provide links to such records, as I can find no sources that offer any date whatsoever as to when the Smiths became Presbyterians. Even Joseph is vague on this point - the 1838 account only says that Joseph's family were Presbyterians as of 1820, not that this was the year that they joined. In fact, Joseph's statement to his mother right after the First Vision that he had learned for himself that Presbyterianism was not true would suggest that the Smith family's Presbyterian affiliation preceded the First Vision.

Why did Joseph hold a Trinitarian view of the Godhead, as shown previously with the Book of Mormon, if he clearly saw that the Father and Son were separate embodied beings in the official First Vision?

He didn't. As shown previously in my reply, the Book of Mormon does not demonstrate that Joseph Smith held a Trinitarian view of the Godhead.

Like the rock in the hat story, I did not know there were multiple First Vision accounts.

This implies that the Church must have been actively withholding this information from you, which is demonstrably false. It was readily available for anyone interested in the subject. If I could find it on my mission from an Ensign in the late 1980s, it wasn't hard to find.

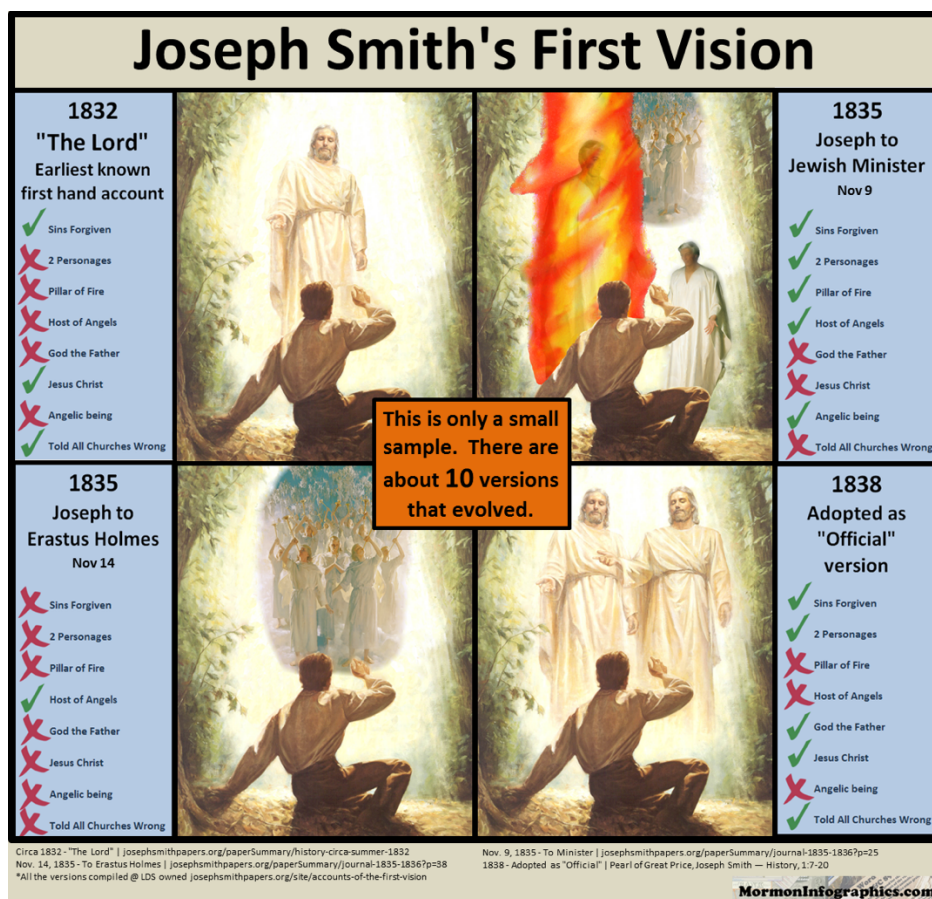
I did not know its contradictions or that the Church members didn't know about a First Vision until 22 years after it supposedly happened.

They didn't? Even though Joseph began writing about it 12 years after it happened, was having documented conversations about it with non-members 15 years after it happened, and wrote a lengthy history of it 18 years after it happened that was later canonized as scripture?

I was unaware of these omissions in the mission field as I was never taught or trained in the Missionary Training Center to teach investigators these facts.

Facts aren't the issue; your assumptions are. The facts as you taught them in the mission field are consistently represented in all four of these accounts. Yet you assume that all four accounts need to be identical, or near identical, to be accurate. If I apply that standard to my own missionary journal and my blog, I would have to conclude that most of my mission probably didn't happen.

And then we have your graphic:



Again, sorry to be so dismissive, but this graphic is irredeemably stupid.

To begin with, you have been discussing four accounts of the First Vision, but only three of them are represented by this graphic, which ignores the 1842 account in the Wentworth Letter. Instead, we suddenly get a mention of “Joseph to Erastus Holmes” in 1835, a nine-world journal entry written five days after the previous version cited in the graphic where Joseph, in his journal, made a passing reference to the experience as his “first visitation of angels.” Apparently, even in an off-handed reference own journal, he had to describe every element of the vision in order to demonstrate that it had actually happened. Given that he had, in fact, recorded all those elements in his journal just five days earlier, the obvious explanation here is that he didn’t feel the need to repeat himself in such a terse entry. By that reasoning, every time Joseph would have mentioned the vision in conversation even in passing, he’d be contradicting himself.

This graphic also maintains that Joseph didn’t mention the Father or the Son in the Nov. 9 1835 account. Even though two personages appear and the second forgives his sins the way that “the Lord” did in the 1832 account, we’re to assume these were only “angelic beings” and not the Father and Son because Joseph didn’t specifically label them here as “Father” and “Son.” But in the same text, after describing the two personages, Joseph goes on to say “and I saw many angels in this vision” as an addendum. Wouldn’t that suggest that the two identified personages were something other than angels? Isn’t it Christ who forgives sins? This graphic is trying to manufacture a contradiction that doesn’t exist.

Perhaps the pettiest distinction made in this goofy graphic is that Joseph included mention of a pillar of “fire” in some versions, but a pillar of “light” in others. Both words appear in the 1832 version, but the word “fire” is crossed out, suggesting Joseph was uncertain as to which would be the better word to

use. The 1838 account uses “light” and not “fire,” yet it describes the light as “above the brightness of the sun,” which, in scientific terms, means “pretty darn bright – fiery, even!”

This is a meaningless distinction. It’s a writer choosing between two very similar words, not conspiratorial evidence of fraud.

Book of Abraham Concerns & Questions:

Oh, goody.

1. Despite Joseph’s claim that this record was written by Abraham “by his own hand, upon papyrus,” scholars have found the original papyrus Joseph translated and have dated it in 1st century CE, nearly 2,000 years after Abraham could have written it.

I know, right? It says the same thing in my Triple Combination, and scholars have found that, it, too, was not handwritten by Abraham. What’s more, scholars have dated the paper to early 21st Century, more than 4,000 years after Abraham could have written it. To add insult to injury, my Pearl of Great Price *isn’t even made of papyrus at all!*

The only other explanation is that Abraham did, in fact, write this stuff on papyrus with his own hand, and people later copied it onto papyrus around the 1st Century, and then someone else, later still, typed it up and printed it out. Should we be concerned that even the online version mentions being written “by his own hand?” Because I don’t think Abraham wrote any of the Internet by his own hand, although it’s been documented that Abraham and Jeff Zuckerberg have never been seen in the same place at the same time.

2. Egyptologists have found the source material for the Book of Abraham to be nothing more than a common pagan Egyptian funerary text -

Stop right there. What did you say?

- a common pagan Egyptian funerary text -

No, not that part. That first bit.

Egyptologists have found the source material for the Book of Abraham...

And there’s your problem. Or at least a very big chunk of it. Because it is an incontrovertible fact that Egyptologists have *not* found the source material for the Book of Abraham, and neither has anyone else.

Nearly all of the papyri Joseph had in his possession was destroyed in the Great Chicago Fire of 1871, but a handful of scraps survived the flames and surfaced in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City nearly a century later. When the Church was given these fragments in 1967, they immediately published pictures of them in The Improvement Era, along with an article stating that the relatively small amount of extant text was clearly not the source material for the Book of Abraham.

Granted, that presents a number of problems that you subsequently address and to which I will subsequently respond, but it's essential to note that everything else you write on this subject is tainted by the assumption that this meager amount of surviving material is, in fact, the "source material" for the Book of Abraham. It is not, and the Church has never once claimed that it is.

So before we dive into Egyptology and things that neither of us understand, it might be wise to outline the problem before we consider possible solutions. And the problem is this: why don't the scraps we have match the text of the Book of Abraham? You see only one possible answer, which is that the Book of Abraham is a fraud. But as I see it, there are three other possible answers.

1. Actually, they do match, and all Egyptologists are wrong, and the Book of the Dead as it appears in all other papyri is, in fact, the Book of Abraham.
2. The material we have represents a small fragment – roughly 10% by most estimates – of all the papyri Joseph Smith had in his possession, and it does not match the description of the "long scroll" that included red as well as black ink that Joseph suggested was the source of the Book of Abraham. So the funerary texts were intermingled with the Book of Abraham, and the true source text used for the translation is lost to us.
3. What Joseph had was, indeed, nothing more than common Egyptian funerary texts, yet these were the catalyst for a series of revelations that constitute the Book of Abraham, much in the same way the Book of Moses was received by revelation as Joseph read Genesis in the Old Testament.

So which of these positions is right? I don't think it's that cut and dried. My personal position has more in common with possibility #2 than any of the other two, but there are elements from #3, and even #1, that cannot be entirely dismissed.

There is a fourth alternative, too, one that probably represents the majority opinion of members of the Church. That opinion is as follows:

4. The Book of Abraham is scripture, and it doesn't matter where it came from.

I do not share the second part of that opinion, but I emphatically share the first part. The Book of Abraham is arguably the most profound book of scripture we have in our possession, and the doctrines found therein define the relationship between God and his children in a way radically at odds with orthodox Christian thought and in a way that is wholly, uniquely Mormon. The importance of the idea that each of us, at our core, is co-eternal with God, cannot be overstated. The concept of pre-existence, the eternal nature of matter and the rejection of Ex Nihilo creation – all of that comes from the Book of Abraham, and, while hints of it can be found in the other standard works, nothing approaching the clarity and beauty of these magnificent truths can be found anywhere else.

The doctrine of Creatio Ex Nihilo, or Creation Out of Nothing, is central to much of the Christian world. As I understand it, the idea is that there was nothing in the universe, or even no universe itself. There was only God. And at one point, God decided He wanted there to be Something instead of Nothing. And so, out of Nothing, he made Something, and voila! Here we are!

This idea is also the source of much mischief.

Those who propose it think that any other explanation diminishes God's omnipotence. In contrast, the Book of Abraham insists that to create is to "organize" that which already exists. It rests on the premise that elements are eternal, and that intelligence is eternal, too. In some form or another, each of us is a unique, eternal Intelligence, co-existent with God, and God has designed the universe and organized matter and intelligence to create a circumstance by which we can become more like Him. Ex Nihilists insist that the Mormon God, therefore, is not omnipotent, because he can't create matter or intelligence out of nothing.

It's because of this tension that there are some very pointless arguments to be had as to what the definition of omnipotence is. The most famous is the question, "Can God create a rock so large that He can't move it?" Or, in other words, can God do something he can't do? Answers to questions like these end up serving the same purpose as imponderables like, "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" Or "what would happen if everyone on earth flushed their toilet at exactly the same time?" (OK, that second one isn't very profound. But it's something to think about!)

Because of the Book of Abraham, I would define omnipotence, therefore, as the capability to do everything that can be done. Ex Nihilists reject this. They say there is nothing that cannot be done, because God can do everything. OK, fine. Then you have to answer questions that don't make God look like a very pleasant guy.

For example: You, Mr. Ex Nihilist, you believe God can do anything? Then why didn't he create a universe free of evil, pain, and suffering? Why did he make us capable of sin? Why did he create a circumstance where a great deal of his supreme creations are doomed to spend an eternity in a lake of fire? What's the point?

The famous literary figure Dr. Pangloss in Voltaire's *Candide* concludes that since this is the only world we've got, and God is perfect, then this is, by definition, the best of all possible worlds, so stop complaining. The problem, of course, is that this places certain limits on God, too. If this is the best he could do, and even us flawed humans can see there are significant problems, then he isn't as omnipotent as Ex Nihilists think he is, is he?

Mormons don't have all the answers about suffering and evil, but, thanks in large part to the Book of Abraham, they do have a context for it that the rest of the world doesn't have. What's happening in this life was colored by what happened in the eternity before it, and it will be mitigated by what happens in the eternity after. Many people use this truth to make rash assumptions about this life's inequities. Clearly, if I'm stronger, happier, richer, or better looking than you, then I must have been a better guy before I got here, no? Well, no. We don't know that. Maybe you were too big a wimp to be able to handle the rough life of someone else. We haven't been given the information, but just knowing that there is more to the story helps us understand why some things don't seem to gibe with what we ought to expect.

The point is that Ex Nihilo creation makes good squarely responsible for all the rotgut in the universe, and it's no use saying otherwise. My understanding of a merciful and omnipotent deity doesn't allow for that kind of nonsense. And that understanding is firmly rooted in the precepts found in the Book of Abraham.

All that is context for why it is so difficult to simply write off the Book of Abraham because of the evidence you cite against it, which is both weak and circumstantial. There is too much substance in the book itself to simply write it off at the first sign of trouble.

Back to your objections, which I will let you state without interruption this time:

2. Egyptologists have found the source material for the Book of Abraham to be nothing more than a common pagan Egyptian funerary text for a deceased man named “Hor” in 1st century CE. In other words, it was a common Breathing Permit that the Egyptians buried with their dead. It has absolutely nothing to do with Abraham or anything Joseph claimed in his translation for the Book of Abraham.

Not so fast.

First of all, the Joseph Smith Papyri contain excerpts from both the Book of Breathings and the Book of the Dead, which, while both are associated with Egyptian burials, are not, in fact, the same texts. This suggests that these fragments were not a single “common Breathing Permit” but, rather, part of a collection that could well include the Book of Abraham, too.

More importantly, it is incorrect to say that the Book of the Dead has “absolutely nothing to do with Abraham.” The discovery of the Testament of Abraham in 1892 and the Apocalypse of Abraham in 1898 show remarkable parallels with the Book of Abraham, but also tie Abraham to Egyptian afterlife traditions. Hugh Nibley’s seminal work [Abraham in Egypt](#) shows the extent to which Abrahamic traditions are tied to the Book of the Dead. Quoting from Nibley:

The evidence that has led the experts in the past ten years to recognize the closest ties between the old Abraham apocrypha and the Egyptian Book of the Dead, especially with references to the pictures in the latter, effectively eliminates the one argument against serious reading of the Book of Abraham.

The whole thing is well worth reading and is chock full of specific connections between the two documents and makes it impossible to blithely assert that Abraham and the Book of the Dead have “absolutely nothing to do with” each other.

Facsimile 1:

The bottom left shows the rediscovered papyrus and what was penciled in by Joseph Smith and his associates. The right is the final draft that’s included in the canonized Book of Abraham.



The following image is what Facsimile 1 is really supposed to look like, based on Egyptology and the same scene discovered elsewhere in Egypt:



I know this wasn't your intent, but I would be remiss if I didn't personally thank you for resolving one of my main concerns about Book of Abraham with your flawed objection here.

I was first introduced to the idea you mention here by an architect who had done a great deal of work for the Church and was on his way out of full fellowship because of his concerns about the Book of Abraham. He told me that Facsimile 1, as found in the Joseph Smith Papyri, had been altered from what it was "really supposed to look like," as you say, and that every time this scene appeared in other settings, the guy with the knife had a jackal's head, and so of course this was just Joseph Smith messing around. I took the architect's word on this, and I found it troubling. From those conversations, I

assumed that the scene in Facsimile 1 must be so common as that it could be found in papyri from the same period.

But what's you've shown me here is that *there is no other scene in any existing papyri that matches Facsimile 1.*

The picture that shows what Facsimile 1 is "supposed to look like" is a modern creation. You didn't pull it from off of papyri; someone drew in the missing pieces thousands of years later in order to match your assumptions. If there really were a scene that matched Facsimile 1, you wouldn't have to rely on someone to whip one up. If it's "supposed to look like" this, then why can't you show me a scene from actual papyri that actually looks like this?

You show me a bunch of "funerary scenes" just a bit later in your letter, but what's striking to me is how little they look like Facsimile 1, either the original or your modern "corrected version." Yes, there's a guy lying on a couch, but that guy looks like King Tut's sarcophagus in most of them, and, really, nothing at all like the guy in Facsimile 1. Where's the crocodile? Where's the bird? Why is the jackal-headed dude leaning over in all the other pics but not in Facsimile 1?

As you pat yourself on the back for assuming that you know what this is "supposed to look like," you skip over a number of very significant differences which make Facsimile 1 unique.

[Hugh Nibley again:](#)


The instant reaction of most professing Egyptologists to the sight of Facsimile No. 1 is to announce that it is the most- routine and commonplace object imaginable, that countless drawings identical with this one are to be found on tomb and coffin walls and papyri. Some of the better scholars were given pause, however, and right from the beginning T. Deveria insisted that the Mormons must have made drastic alterations in the sketches, because they were decidedly not as they should be. The main effort of the learned since the discovery of the original in a damaged condition in 1967 has been to reconstruct the missing parts in a way to show that they were really nothing out of the ordinary, while quietly ignoring the really impressive uniqueness of the parts that are not missing.

For instance, an eminent Egyptologist maintained that the fingers of the reclining man's upper hand are really the feathers of a bird. In time, however, he yielded enough to declare that even if they were fingers it would make no difference to the interpretation. Wouldn't it? If this turns out to be the only instance known of the man on the couch lifting two hands, that would indeed make a great deal of difference. But forget about the fingers and the feathers; in what other "embalming scene" does a priest with or without an Anubis headdress, lean over a corpse that is waving both an arm and a leg? That gesture, as a number of special studies have pointed out, indicates a stirring to life and a rising from the couch, not the utter quiescence of a corpse about to be laid away. And what about the big crocodial under the couch? Or the lotus stand? You will not find them in any of the other Lion-couch vignettes. This figure waving an arm and a leg is indeed quite uncommon among lion couch scenes, being rarely described, we are told because of its peculiarly sacred nature, but it does occur, and in a most significant context.

Turns out, then, that even the unaltered pieces we have don't look at all the way they're "really supposed to look like." There's clearly a lot more going on here that you're too willing to ignorantly

dismiss out of hand.

The following is a side-by-side comparison of what Joseph Smith translated in Facsimile 1 versus what it actually says according to Egyptologists and modern Egyptology:

The Book of Abraham		
A common funerary document		
Joseph Smith's Interpretation	Translated Correctly? Facsimile #1, Book of Abraham	Modern Egyptological Interpretation
The Angel of the Lord.		1 The spirit or "ba" of Hôr (The deceased fellow)
Abraham fastened upon an altar		2 The deceased: His name was "Hôr"
The idolatrous priest of Elkenah		3 Anubis (see original image, this figure was originally portrayed with the head of a Jackal)
The altar for sacrifice by the idolatrous priests, standing before the gods of Elkenah, Libnah, Mahmackrah, Korash, and Pharaoh.		4 A common funereal bier or "lion couch"
The idolatrous god of Elkenah.		5
The idolatrous god of Libnah.		6 Canopic jars containing the deceased's internal organs.
The idolatrous god of Mahmackrah.		7
The idolatrous god of Korash.		8
The idolatrous god of Pharaoh.		9 This is the god "Horus"
Abraham in Egypt		10 A libation table bearing wines, oils, etc. Common in Egypt.
Designed to represent the pillars of heaven, as understood by the Egyptians.		11 A palace façade, called a "serekh"
Raukeeyang, signifying expanse, or the firmament over our heads; but in this case, in relation to this subject, the Egyptians meant it to signify Shaumau, to be hig, or the heavens, answering to the Hebrew word, Shaumahyeen.		12 This is just the water that the crocodile swims in.
Joseph Smith's Interpretation available @ lds.org/scriptures/pgp/abr/fac-1 Modern Egyptological Interpretation compiled @ bookofabraham.com/boamathie/BOA_6.html LDS apologist explanation @ en.fairmormon.org/Book_of_Abraham/Joseph_Smith_Papyri/Facsimiles/Facsimile_1		
<div>MormonInfographics.com</div>		

MormonInfographics.com

Ah, we meet again, MormonInfographics.com. This is the same outfit that thinks it's a scandal that Joseph Smith couldn't choose between the words "light" and "fire," or that a nine-word reference to the First Vision needs to include every element found in the Pearl of Great Price version in order to be accurate. I don't understand why you discount everything "unofficial apologists" have to say because they're supposedly too biased to be credible, yet you accept nonsense like this without qualification because it comes from people who are critical of the church, which means they must be objective.

Do you really think that bias is a ratchet that only goes one way?

Okay, fine, never mind. Let's wrestle with this latest goodie from our Infographical pals. To do so, we need to start out by admitting where all of us fall short. I'm not an Egyptologist, and neither are you. And neither, I might add, are the good people at MormonInfoGraphics.com. So who provides your authoritative "Modern Egyptological Interpretation" that makes its way into the graphic that provides the foundation of your argument?

The answer can be found in the link in the bottom left-hand corner of the graphic. There we find this link - http://bookofabraham.com/boamathie/BOA_6.html - which leads us to a piece on the subject by

someone named Kevin Mathie. And who is Kevin Mathie? Is he an Egyptological authority upon whom we can readily rely? I visited his website to find out, and here's what I found...



Mathie's Egyptological qualifications, as per his website:

Kevin Mathie is a professional composer, music director, and pianist who has more than 25 years' experience working in the music industry. He specializes in orchestral and hybrid orchestral music (i.e., orchestral music combined with electronic instruments such as synths and guitar).

His compositions have been featured on the television network SHOWTIME®, and have also been used in film, television, radio, and live theater. During his career, he has also led more than 100+ musical productions, and received numerous awards for his work, including:

Best Behind-the-Scenes Musical Theater MVPs (i.e., Most Valuable Player; 2013) – Salt Lake City Weekly's 2013 Arty Award

Best Musical Score (2014) – Las Vegas 48-Hour Film Project, for the film Enthusiasm

Best Musical Score (2009) – Salt Lake City 48-Hour Film Project, for the film, S.H.A.T.

Kevin is currently the music director and arranger for Salt Lake Acting Company's popular annual production of Saturday's Voyeur, and also regularly composes for and performs at several other theaters. He is a member of both ASCAP and the Dramatists Guild of America.

Unlike your previous impeccable scholarly source Brad Kirkland, however, Kevin Mathie has apparently spent no time involved in productions that feature killer tomatoes.

So what on earth makes his opinion on this subject any more valuable than my own? After all, I have a prestigious BFA in Theatre from the University of Southern California, which was recently established to be [*the most expensive university in the country*](#). I have been active in the theatre for over four

decades. I have at least as much musical theatre experience as Mr. Mathie does. I've even played Harold Hill in *The Music Man* – twice! By your standards, that makes me at least as authoritative an Egyptologist as Mathie, yes?

So, having burnished my Egyptological credentials, let me tell demonstrate why even a cursory review of the so-called “Modern Egyptological Interpretation” reveals it to be useless.

The problem is that you're conflating art with text, as if both are impart information in the same manner and with the same restraints. They don't. The reason they say that “a picture is worth a thousand words” is that it takes at least a thousand words to textually describe an image, and even then, words are inadequate to the task.

For instance, take Kevin Mathie's splash page, pictured above. Without actually providing the image, I can tell you that it features a large fellow with a beard seated at a grand piano on top of a mountain, with a host of other mountains in the background. He is surrounded by flying musical instruments, including a violin with wings, as well as sheet music that appears to be blown around by the high mountain air.

Now is that an accurate description? I think so. Is it a comprehensive description? By no means. There are a lot of elements left out – the musical score that seems to be following one of the violins, for example. And my description of the sheet music, while technically accurate, is obviously not how Mathie intended it to be interpreted. The music looks like it's just blowing everywhere, but I get the sense that this is a visual representation of how music is supposed to sound. Like the historically inaccurate church art we reviewed earlier, he's using iconography to emotionally convey a number of different ideas and feelings, and each element in the picture is fraught with symbolism that is subject to multiple interpretations.

Now suppose I were to ask you to “translate” Mathie's picture into ancient Egyptian. Does the flying violin represent the beauty of music, or its ability to transcend space and time, or Mathie's personal talent, or music's innate spirituality? I think a case can be made for all those things. Does each image within the larger image have a single, static interpretation the way words do? Of course not.

So back to non-Egyptologist/Saturday's *Voyeur* songwriter Kevin's Mathie's official “Modern Egyptological Interpretation.” Let's start at the end and see where that takes us.

Joseph Smith's explanation of Item #12 is lengthy and involved, but Mathie assures us that “This is just the water that the crocodile swims in.” Um, okay. Why is there a crocodile in the first place? Why did the artist put water with a crocodile under a picture of a human sacrifice? This would be like looking at the winged violin in the Mathie splash page and interpreting the wings as “just the wings the violin uses to fly.” Well, yes. But why is the violin flying? Violins don't generally fly – shouldn't we assume some deeper symbolism there? By the same token, crocodiles swimming in bodies of water can't usually be found underneath people lying on couches. Insisting that there is one, and only one interpretation of any of these images is something a real, non-musical theatre Egyptologist would likely reject.

Similarly, in items 5-8, Joseph provides detailed explanations for the jars under the couch, but Mathie insists these are only “Canopic jars containing the deceased's internal organs.” That's simply wrong on its face. In the first place, the guy on the couch clearly isn't deceased. He's raising his leg and waving

his arm, which, as Nibley points out in the quote above, indicates that this guy ain't dead yet. That makes him completely different from the other images you provide, all of which are clearly King Tut-esque mummies with no movement at all. The lazy Mathie interpretation is predicated on the false premise that this is a corpse like all the other corpses in other pictures, while this picture is showing us something else entirely.

Also, why do these canopic jars have animal heads? What's the significance of one being an eagle and one being a jackal, etc.? Are we to presume that there's no way they could represent false gods, the way Joseph says they do? (Isn't Anubis a false god? Doesn't he have a jackal's head?) Are we simply to assume this is just like the crocodile water, which is only crocodile water? Is there no other way to interpret a flying violin with wings as anything other than an actual flying violin?

This is what happens when you argue from authority, especially when the authority you're invoking doesn't really exist. The implication of the graphic is that this is an explanation providing by actual Egyptologists, when it's actually provided by a musical theatre aficionado combing through articles he doesn't understand and cherry-picking explanations he likes. There is no actual repudiation of the Book of Abraham by non-Mormon Egyptologists, because, frankly, they don't care enough about the issue to pay any attention to it. To argue, then, as you seem to be arguing, that there has been a deliberate and definitive debunking of the Book of Abraham's claims by contemporary Egyptologists is to overstate your case considerably.

People who dive into the Egyptological elements of the Book of Abraham tend to be Mormons, because the Mormons are the only ones who care. But no matter how cogent or brilliant these Mormons may be, you can just label them "unofficial apologists" and nonchalantly toss out everything they say without consideration, all the while placing your complete Egyptological confidence in the guy who won Salt Lake City Weekly's 2013 Arty Award for Behind-the-Scenes Musical Theatre MVP. I don't think that places you in an intellectual position of strength.

And it should be noted that there are, in fact, well-educated Mormon Egyptologists, trained outside of Brigham Young University, who do not view the facsimiles as problematic. In fact, they believe there are striking correlations between the facsimiles and the Book of Abraham with Egyptology and apocryphal Abrahamic traditions. If anyone's interested in diving down that rabbit hole, they're welcome to do so – [here](#) might be a good place to start. I'm not going to review the arguments they make, as I'm no more qualified to authoritatively evaluate them than either you or Kevin Mathie, but I think it appropriate to point out that there are serious and significant scholars making such arguments, and that calling them names or pretending they aren't there isn't the same thing as discrediting them.

Figure #3 is supposed to be the jackal-headed Egyptian god of mummification and afterlife, Anubis; not a human.

By that reasoning, Figure #4 is "supposed to be" a King Tut-like mummy, but he's not. If one of these figures is clearly not what he's "supposed to be," why should we expect the expected from the other figure?

The following images show similar funerary scenes which have been discovered elsewhere in Egypt. Notice that the jackal-headed Egyptian god of death and afterlife Anubis is consistent in every funerary scene.



Also notice that the figure on the couch, while consistent across all four of these examples, is entirely inconsistent with the figure on the couch in Facsimile #1. The extant version of this scene found in the Joseph Smith Papyrus repudiates your contention that this is just a commonplace image, as all of the comparisons you provide confirm Facsimile #1's uniqueness.

Facsimile 2:

The following is a side-by-side comparison of what Joseph Smith translated in Facsimile 2 versus what it actually says according to Egyptologists and modern Egyptology:

The Book of Abraham		
Hypocephalus; a funerary amulet		
Joseph Smith's Interpretation	Translated Correctly? Facsimile #2, Book of Abraham	Modern Egyptological Interpretation
Kolob, The residence of God	1	1 The god Khnumu.
Stands next to Kolob	2	2 "Amun-Re", god with two faces representing rising & setting sun.
God sitting on his throne, clothed with power and authority	3	3 "Horus-Re" riding in his boat
Raukeyang; also the number 1,000; The measuring of time of Oliblish	4	4 Represents Sokar, not a number
Enish-go-on-dosh; a governing planet	5	5 Cow of Hathor, behind which stands a uzat-headed goddess holding a sacred tree.
Represents this earth in it's four quarters	6	6 The four (4) sons of Horus, they can represent the four cardinal points of earth
God sitting on his throne, revealing through the heavens the grand Key-words of the Priesthood	7	7 The god "Min", an ithyphallic god; that is, a sexually aroused male deity.
Contains writings that can only be revealed in the temple.	8	8 "grant that the soul of Osiris Shechank may live."
Ought not to be revealed at the present time.	9	9 "the netherworld (below the earth) and his great waters"
	10	10 "O might god, lord of heaven and earth"
	11	11 "O god of the sleeping ones from the time of creation" (Read in order 11, 10, 9, 8)
	12	12 "near" and "wrap"
	13	13 "which made by"
	14	14 "breathings"
	15	15 "this book"
	16	16 "and may this soul and its possessor never be desecrated in the netherworld"
Will be given in the own due time of the Lord	17	17 "May this tomb never be desecrated"
	18	18 "I am Djabyt in the house of Benben in Heliopolis, so exalted and glorious. [I am] copulating bull without equal. [I am] that mighty god in the house of Benben of Heliopolis... that might god..."
	19	19 "You shall be as that god, the Busirian"
No Annotation Given	22	22 Writing: "The name of this mighty god"
	23	23 Figures 22,23; Baboons are adoring souls of that realm
<div> <div>JOSEPH SMITH vs EGYPTOLOGISTS</div> <div>4 quarters of earth vs "Sons of Horus"</div> </div> <div> <div>JOSEPH SMITH vs EGYPTOLOGISTS</div> <div>God on his throne vs Min, phallic God</div> </div>		
<small>Joseph Smith's Interpretation available @ lds.org/scriptures/ppp/abr/fac-2 Modern Egyptological Interpretation compiled @ bookofabraham.com/bosmathie/BOA_7.html LDS apologist explanation @ en.fairmormon.org/Book_of_Abraham/Joseph_Smith_Papyrus</small>		
MormonInfographics.com		

And there's the link in the left-hand corner of the graphic– it seems Kevin Mathie strikes again. All the

problems I referenced with regard to our musical non-Egyptologist's interpretation of Facsimile #1 apply here, too, as does the error of equating art with text as having a single, conclusive, and exclusive interpretation.

Also, were you just going to ignore that Joseph Smith and Kevin Mathie both interpret item #6 in almost exactly the same way? How is that possible that Joseph Smith hit a bullseye so clearly that not even a hostile critic like Kevin Mathie can pretend otherwise?

A lot more going on here than either of us understand, and you're placing far too much confidence in authorities who really don't have the answers you think they have.

One of the most disturbing facts I discovered in my research of Facsimile 2 is figure #7. Joseph Smith said that this is "God sitting on his throne..." It's actually Min, the pagan Egyptian god of fertility or sex. Min is sitting on a throne with an erect penis (which can be seen in the figure). In other words, Joseph Smith is saying that this figure with an erect penis is Heavenly Father sitting on His throne.

Sorry to crack a smile, but I don't think this is a "disturbing fact;" I think it's a delightful one. An aversion to acknowledging the existence of genitalia is more puritanical than doctrinal, and Mormons who believe in an anthropomorphic deity ought not be surprised to learn that such a god would be anatomically correct. Egyptian mores were clearly different from the Victorian ones that still linger in LDS Church culture, and I see this as nothing more than an (admittedly crude by today's standards) acknowledgement that God has a body. (Although there's also some debate over whether or not that's a penis or an arm. Actually, I'm not sure which part is supposed to be the arm/penis. As far as pornography goes, this is pretty tame stuff.)

Regardless, Egyptologists and Joseph Smith both acknowledge here we have an anthropomorphic god on a throne. Joseph Smith says it's God the Father; flying violinist Kevin Mathie cribs from Egyptologists and announces that it's Min. Understanding that art can have multiple interpretations, it could easily be both. In any case, it's pretty uncanny that both would see it as a god on a throne, because to my untrained eye, it looks like a goose running with a wooden crate on its back.

I think the great deal of the problems you have with the Book of Abraham originate from a false dichotomy – either everything Joseph Smith had to say about the facsimiles and the extant papyrus text can be objectively verified by modern academics, or the Book of Abraham is a complete fraud. But reality doesn't fit into either of those categories very well. If Joseph is a complete fraud, why does he rightly recognize a god on a throne in an image that looks like a goose with a wooden crate? Why does he identify images that represent "the four corners of the earth" that Egyptologists agree is correct? How is it that his Abraham is consistent with apocryphal Abrahamic writings that weren't published until after Joseph's death? Yet, on the flip side, why would he make so many other interpretations of the material that no Egyptologist recognizes?

Personally, my answer is one rooted in a broader context – the idea of myths and symbols being appropriated and modified by different cultures for different purposes, especially over vast periods of time. Prior to World War II, the gammadion cross appeared on American military airplanes, and it was also a common symbol of peace and industry in Japan and among Native Americans. But since Hitler got ahold of it and made it the icon of the Third Reich, the gammadion cross, aka the swastika, now has an entirely different meaning and association that has swallowed up all non-fascistic interpretations

forever.

If one assumes that Abraham wrote “on papyrus, by his own hand” the material Joseph used to translate the book that bears his name, one also has to assume that the handwriting took place at least two thousand years before the copyist who put on the Joseph Smith Papyri got ahold of it. Two thousand years is a very, very long time. What kind of additional or extraneous meanings would cultures have attached to those symbols in the interim, symbols which were ancient even in the time of the Pharaohs? It would be the most natural thing in the world for a culture to appropriate the inherent power of an ancient symbol to graft an icon of a false god onto the icon of a true one. (And maybe, just maybe, they added a penis because they were feeling naughty.)

I took a class in Intellectual Traditions of the West at the University of Utah back in 1990, where a teacher insisted that Jesus must have been a myth because his “hero’s journey” can be found in all kinds of disparate mythological traditions that preceded Christianity by hundreds or even thousands of years. This was also the position of famed Christian apologist C.S. Lewis, who I consider to be entirely official and an honorary Mormon. Lewis’s youthful atheism was rooted in similar arguments.

I quote now from the Lewis biography “The Narnian,” written by Alan Jacobs, citation from page 48:

A different case against God, or at least against Christianity, is provided by The Golden Bough, Sir James Frazer’s massive, multivolume study of ancient religious practices in Europe and the Middle East... Frazer’s exploration of “dying-god myths” – along with other common religious practices that, Frazer argued, emerged from the cycle of the seasons – convinced many intellectuals that Christianity was a late, unoriginal, and not especially appealing version of an archaic religious habit... young Jack [aka C.S.] Lewis took Frazer’s argument for granted... [that] spiritual experience was only religion, religion was only myth, and myth was only an intellectual formulation of agricultural cultures’ need to adapt themselves to, and give meaning to, the changes of the seasons and the unpredictability of weather. Jesus Christ, Osiris, even Balder the Beautiful – they were all articulations of one of the basic features of material existence: that at one time of the year things come to life, and at another they sink into the earth.

Lewis later rejected this idea and devoted a great deal of his life to actively refuting it. He called the story of Christ “a true myth: a myth working on us in the same way as the others, but with tremendous difference [in] that *it really happened*.” [Emphasis in original.] He concluded that “the Pagan stories are God expressing himself through the minds of poets.” The poets are echoing the truth of God in their stories, but “Christianity is God expressing himself through ‘real things.’” [*The Narnian*, p. 149]

Mormon theology allows us to take Lewis’s theory several steps further. We believe that the gospel of Christ was taught to Adam and has been part of the human family since the beginning of time. If that’s the case, then echoes of that story would have diffused into every culture and every civilization. Like a game of telephone, where children whisper a sentence into the ear of their neighbor through several iterations until the final sentence bears little resemblance to what was originally said, one should expect elements of truth to be mingled with myths that are passed down even through periods of apostasy. The fact that, say, the Legend of Gilgamesh has so many parallels with the story of Noah suggests that a true story was changed and embellished by the artistic license of the ancients.

So back to the Book of Abraham. If Abraham wrote his account “by his own hand” several millennia

ago, and that account were to be passed down among Egyptian scribes for thousands of years, it would be unavoidable that scribes would borrow themes and symbols from the original story as they fashioned their own myths and legends. What seems likely to me is that whatever text and artwork was on the papyrus contained some kind of mixture of both truth and embellishment, and Joseph, via revelation, was able to extract the divine gold buried under the man-made dross. That would also mean that both Joseph and the Egyptologists are correct at the same time – the figure with the phallus represented Min, but thousands of years earlier, it represented God the Father, yet that interpretation was later modified and lost until Joseph the Seer was able to find it again.

That explanation, which does not tidily fit into the box of one of the three possible explanations I previously offered for the Book of Abraham, is the one that best matches the existing evidence. It's why the Book of Abraham contains correct information and interpretations that Joseph couldn't possibly have guessed by accident, but it also contains material that doesn't jibe with a Saturday's Voyeur's "Modern Egyptological Interpretation." I know the ambiguity troubles you, but honest academics are forced to acknowledge and accept that kind of uncertainty. No responsible scholar would ever claim that modern scholarship allows us to perfectly and definitively understand the ancient world.

The following is a side-by-side comparison of what Joseph Smith translated in Facsimile 3 versus what it actually says according to Egyptologists and modern Egyptology:

The Book of Abraham

Facsimile #3, The Breathing Permit

Figure #1

Interpreter	Translation
Joseph	Abraham
Egyptologist	Osiris

Figure #2

Interpreter	Translation
Joseph	Male - Pharaoh
Egyptologist	Female - Isis

Figure #3

Interpreter	Translation
Joseph	Abraham in Egypt
Egyptologist	Libation Table

Figure #4

Interpreter	Translation
Joseph	Male - Prince
Egyptologist	Female - Maat

Figure #5

Interpreter	Translation
Joseph	Shulem, a waiter
Egyptologist	Hôr, the deceased

Figure #6

Interpreter	Translation
Joseph	Olimlah, a slave
Egyptologist	Anubis, a god

Joseph offered no translation of Lower Vignette

"O gods of the necropolis, gods of the caverns, gods of the south, north, west, and east, grant salvation to the Osiris Hôr, the justified, born by Taikhibit."

Egyptologist Translation of Lower

Joseph Smith's Interpretation	Modern Egyptological Interpretation
Abraham sitting upon Pharaoh's throne, by the politeness of the king, with a crown upon his head, representing the Priesthood, as emblematical of the grand Presidency in Heaven; with the scepter of justice and judgment in his hand.	1 This is Osiris Writing above figure: "Recitation by Osiris, Foremost of the Westerners" The "atef" crown also identifies him as Osiris
King Pharaoh, whose name is given in the characters above his head.	2 This figure is female not male. Writing above figure: "Isis the great, the god's mother"
Signifies Abraham in Egypt as given also in Figure 10 of Facsimile No. 1.	3 This is a libation table (wine, oils, etc.)
Prince of Pharaoh, King of Egypt, as written above the hand.	4 This figure is female not male. Writing above figure: "Maat, mistress of the gods."
Shulem, one of the king's principal waiters, as represented by the characters above his hand.	5 This is the deceased individual wearing the traditional cone of perfumed grease and lotus flower on his head. Writing above figure: "The Osiris Hôr, justified forever"
Olimlah, a slave belonging to the prince.	6 Not a slave, this is Anubis, guide of the dead, who is there to Support the deceased. Writing above figure: "Recitation by Anubis, who makes protection(?), foremost of the embalming booth,..."

Joseph Smith's Interpretation available @ lds.org/scriptures/pgp/abr/fac-3
 Modern Egyptological Interpretation compiled @ bookofabraham.com/boamathie/BOA_6.html
 LDS apologist explanation @ en.fairmormon.org/Book_of_Abraham/Joseph_Smith_Papyri

MormonInfographics.com

Oh, boy. Kevin Mathie again. Haven't we beaten this dead horse long enough? All the stuff I said about Facsimiles 1 and 2 applies here, too.

I'll add this comment about Facsimile 3 from a Mormon Egyptologist John Gee, who has degrees from Berkely and a doctorate in Egyptology from Yale. Yeah, he's a Mormon, so you'll write him off, but surely his opinion should carry equal weight with a specialist in orchestral and hybrid music.

Here's what Gee had to say:

"Facsimile 3 has always been the most neglected of the three facsimiles in the Book of Abraham. Unfortunately, most of what has been said about this facsimile is seriously wanting at best and highly erroneous at worst. This lamentable state of affairs exists because the basic Egyptological work on Facsimile 3 has not been done, and much of the evidence lies neglected and unpublished in museums. Furthermore, what an ancient Egyptian understood by a vignette and what a modern Egyptologist understands by the same vignette are by no means the same thing. Until we understand what the Egyptians understood by this scene, we have no hope of telling whether what Joseph Smith said about them matches what the Egyptians thought about them."

Why should I presume John Gee is wrong and Kevin Mathie is right?

3. Egyptologists state that Joseph Smith's translation of the papyri and facsimiles are gibberish and have absolutely nothing to do with what the papyri and facsimiles actually are and what they actually say. Nothing in each and every facsimile is correct to what Joseph Smith claimed they said.

Nothing? How can you say that when even your own graphics above say otherwise? Four corners of the earth. God on his throne. Two bullseyes in Facsimile #2 that Joseph couldn't possibly have arrived at on his own. There are many, many others that Mormons have found, but since they're Mormons, you can dismiss them ad hominem along with their very credible arguments, many of which can be found [here](#).

Just saying they're not there doesn't make them go away.

Also, just to nitpick, I don't think the word "gibberish" means what you think it means. The primary definition of "gibberish" is "unintelligible or meaningless speech or writing." Joseph's writing on this subject is both intelligible and meaningful. Even if it is incorrect, it's certainly not "gibberish."

Facsimile 1:

1. The names are wrong.

Not if the names are representative of an earlier interpretation of these symbols than the one Kevin Mathie is using.

2. The Abraham scene is wrong.

Not at all. You're wrong to assume that the scene is consistent with other couch table scenes when it demonstrably is not, as most persuasively evidenced by the presence of a live body on the table and not a sarcophagus.

3. He names gods that are not part of the Egyptian belief system; of any

known mythology or belief system.

For this to be definitively wrong, you would have to conclusively prove that these names didn't exist. Since you can't prove a negative, your assertion here is meaningless. (And, anyway, Mormons have found persuasive evidence of antiquity in these names, as seen [here](#).)

Facsimile 2:

1. Joseph translated 11 figures on this facsimile. None of the names are correct as each one of these gods does not even exist in Egyptian religion or any recorded mythology.

What on earth do you mean he "translated" 11 figures? As mentioned earlier, art doesn't "translate" the same way text does. No, Joseph presents the figures as they appear on the papyrus and offers names for them that you presume can be proven not to exist, despite the logical impossibility of proving negatives. You're also presuming that symbols remain constantly and consistently interpreted over the course of thousands of years, which is rarely, if ever, the case.

2. Joseph misidentifies every god in this facsimile.

Good thing we have a non-Egyptological member of ASCAP who got it right, then, right? In a fallacious argument from authority, which is all you're really offering here, shouldn't the Mormon Egyptologist trump the non-qualified critics?

Facsimile 3:

1. Joseph misidentifies the Egyptian god Osiris as Abraham.

My theory is that he was originally Abraham, and that he was later misidentified by Egyptians as Osiris, much in the same way *View of the Hebrews* mistakes Quetzalcoatl for Moses. (See? Misappropriation of symbols. It happens even with non-Mormons, too!)

2. Misidentifies the Egyptian god Isis as the Pharaoh.

Same deal as above.

3. Misidentifies the Egyptian god Maat as the Prince of the Pharaoh.

Ibid.

4. Misidentifies the Egyptian god Anubis as a slave.

Wait a minute. That guy's Anubis? Isn't Anubis the one with the jackal's head in all your non-Facsimile 1-resembling couch scenes? Why does this Anubis look nothing like the other Anubises? He looks like an ancient Ed Grimley with that weird spurt of hair sticking out of his head. Fact is, this interpretation, like all of the interpretations you offer, are far from definitive.

5. Misidentifies the dead Hor as a waiter.

What if he's really Quetzalcoatl?

6. Joseph misidentifies – twice – a female as a male.

What if they're just lovely men?

Sorry to be so flippant, but you're presuming definitive interpretations of these figures where none exist. (See the quote from John Gee, above.) If they did, you'd have a more credible source for them than Kevin Mathie.

4. The Book of Abraham teaches a Newtonian view of the universe.

Wholly incorrect. Sir Isaac Newton's major contribution to our understanding of the nature of the universe was to advance heliocentrism – the idea that the earth revolves around the sun - definitely disprove geocentrism; i.e. the idea that everything in the universe orbits the earth. Yet the Book of Abraham has no mention of earth or anything else revolving around the sun. Rather, the text suggests that Abraham thought geocentrically, with planets and stars arranged in tiers "above" the earth, and everything cosmologically is compared to its relationship with the earth, implying a geocentric model, which was un-Newtonian as it is possible to be.

Yet even this is supposition. Neither geocentrism or heliocentrism is explicitly offered as a cosmological framework in the Book of Abraham. Simply asserting that the book is "Newtonian" cannot be sustained by any evidence from the book itself.

Its Newtonian astronomy concepts, mechanics, and models of the universe have been discredited by 20th century Einsteinian physics.

Given that the Book of Abraham offers no Newtonian astronomy concepts, mechanics, or models, your statement here is worthless.

What we find in Abraham 3 and the official scriptures of the LDS Church regarding science reflects a Newtonian world concept.

Really? Where? Please show your work. This statement is wholly false.

The Catholic Church's Ptolemaic cosmology was displaced by the new Copernican and Newtonian world model, just as the nineteenth-century, canonized, Newtonian world view is challenged by Einstein's twentieth-century science.

Also, the movie "Attack of the Killer Tomatoes" featured the debut of the song "Puberty Love." That fact is as relevant to a discussion of the Book of Abraham as your recitation of the history of physics.

Keith Norman, an LDS scholar, has written that for the LDS Church, "It is no longer possible to pretend there is no conflict."

Keith Norman? Am I supposed to know who he is?

Your A-Team of LDS scholars consists of a lawyer who did some fundraising for a private archeological group (Thomas Ferguson), the guy in charge of the animated Killer Tomatoes series (Boyd Kirkland), the musical director for the Salt Lake Acting Company (Kevin Mathie), and now this Keith Norman guy, whose entire contribution to LDS scholarship seems to consist of a couple of articles written for Dialogue and Sunstone almost thirty years ago. The idea that his opinion represents a definitive deconstruction or even an accurate representation of LDS cosmology is more than a little silly.

Those troubled by Mr. Norman's assertions would do well to [read the whole article](#), to which you do not provide a link. In the piece, Norman himself is quite self-effacing and readily concedes that his academic credentials and skills are not up to the task of providing anything more than his personal speculation on this subject. "Astronomy has always held a fascination for me, but my mathematical abilities are awaiting the Millennium for development," he says. (Norman's degree is in early Christian studies, not any hard sciences.) Later, he admits he only has "a superficial knowledge of what has been going on in theoretical physics in this [the 20th] century. I can presume to offer no more than that, as I am still struggling with books on the subject written for the layman."

He also qualifies his observations about Mormon cosmology with a concession that no cosmological framework in LDS theology has "ever [been] systematized," which means that any conflicts he observes are only with his own personal theories of what that cosmology is. And right after he writes the sentence you quote above re: the conflict between cosmology and doctrine, he writes this sentence:

Given the dynamic nature of Mormon theology, and the mechanism of progressive revelation in accordance with our capacity to receive, such a reconciliation [between cosmology and doctrine] is by no means far-fetched.

He also offers no evidence that the Book of Abraham teaches a Newtonian view of the universe. He cites the B of A only once. Here's the reference in its entirety:

The astronomical assertions in the Pearl of Great Price may indicate that God rules within our own galaxy, the Milky Way: "Kolob is set nigh unto the throne of God, to govern all those planets which belong to the same order as that upon which thou standest" (Abr. 3:9; cf. facsimile 2, esp. fig. 5). Does each God have his and her own galaxy or cluster of galaxies?

A good question, and one that in no way undermines the cosmology of the Book of Abraham. Correct me if I'm wrong, but your proof-texting of Norman's article suggests you didn't actually read it before you cited it.

Norman continues: "Scientific cosmology began its leap forward just when Mormon doctrine was becoming stabilized. The revolution in twentieth-century physics precipitated by Einstein dethroned Newtonian physics as the ultimate explanation of the way the universe works. Relativity theory and quantum mechanics, combined with advances in astronomy, have established a vastly different picture of how the universe began, how it is structured and operates, and the nature of matter and energy. This new scientific cosmology poses a serious challenge to the Mormon version of the universe."

Again, you're presuming more than Mr. Norman himself does. There is no definitive "Mormon version of the universe" in cosmological terms, and Norman is only offering a personal theory of what that

version is, frankly conceding he is unqualified to do so with any academic authority. And none of this has any bearing on the presence or absence of Newtonian physics in the Book of Abraham, an issue Norman doesn't address at all.

Many of the astronomical and cosmological ideas found in both Joseph Smith's environment and in the Book of Abraham have become out of vogue, and some of these Newtonian concepts are scientific relics. The evidence suggests that the Book of Abraham reflects concepts of Joseph Smith's time and place rather than those of an ancient world. – Grant Palmer, *An Insider's View of Mormon Origins*, p. 25

Quite the opposite. The Book of Abraham implies geocentrism, which would have been right at home in the ancient world and entirely alien to Joseph Smith's time and place. Citing specific examples of any supposed "scientific relics" from the book would be helpful. The reason neither you nor Palmer actually cites them is that they just aren't there.

5. 86% of Book of Abraham chapters 2, 4, and 5 are King James Version Genesis chapters 1, 2, 11, and 12. Sixty-six out of seventy-seven verses are quotations or close paraphrases of King James Version wording. – *An Insider's View of Mormon Origins*, p.19

The Book of Abraham is supposed to be an ancient text written thousands of years ago "by his own hand upon papyrus." What are 17th century King James Version text doing in there? What does this say about the book being anciently written by Abraham?

This is just a reprise of the same issue you raised in your issues with Book of Mormon translation, and, once again, you demonstrate a fundamental ignorance of the relationship between an original text and its translated version. A modern translator's word choices say nothing about the antiquity of a given text, and, absent copyright issues, there is nothing sinister about translators relying on existing translations of similar material to guide them in their translation. When the Angel Gabriel appeared to Mary, he quoted from the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament, which was the most modern version then available. What does this say about the Old Testament as an ancient document? Nothing whatsoever.

Also, never forget that when King James Bible translated the KJV between 1604 and 1611, they were occasionally put their words into the text to make reading more English.

6. Why are there anachronisms in the Book of Abraham? *Chaldeans? Egyptus? Pharaoh?*

These look more like legitimate translation choices than actual anachronisms.

Re: Chaldeans: Abraham was born in Ur of the Chaldees, and so it's not surprising that he also refers to his land as "Chaldea" and its inhabitants as "Chaldeans." It's clear from the text that the use of the term "Chaldeans" has reference to people from Ur, not people from the nation of Chaldea that came along much later. How else should Abraham have described the people from Ur of the Chaldees? Chaldeesians? Ur-ites?

Re: Egyptus: Prepublication versions of the B of A manuscript refer to Egyptus as "Zeptah," which is similar to the chronologically appropriate and non-anachronistic "S3t-Pth," which can be rendered in a

Latinized version as “Egyptus.” This independent etymology actually strengthens the case for the Book of Abraham’s ancient origins.

Re: Pharoah: The fact that Egyptians didn’t use the word Pharoah to describe their kings until later than Abraham would have written his book doesn’t – and shouldn’t - preclude a translator from using the commonly understood word in a modern translation.

7. Facsimile 2, Figure #5 states the sun receives its “light from the revolutions of Kolob.” We now know that the process of nuclear fusion is what makes the stars and suns shine. With the discovery of quantum mechanics, scientists learned that the sun’s source of energy is internal, and not external. The sun shines because of thermonuclear fusion; not because it gets its light from any other star as claimed by the Book of Abraham.

This one inspired me to set up a class action lawsuit against Stevie Wonder for his song “You Are the Sunshine of my Life” because, contrary to his scientifically inaccurate lyrics, the sunshine of his life is actually a product of thermonuclear fusion.

The comment on Figure #5 reads as follows:

Is called in Egyptian Enish-go-on-dosh; this is one of the governing planets also, and is said by the Egyptians to be the Sun, and to borrow its light from Kolob through the medium of Kae-e-vanrash, which is the grand Key, or, in other words, the governing power, which governs fifteen other fixed planets or stars, as also Floeese or the Moon, the Earth and the Sun in their annual revolutions. This planet receives its power through the medium of Kli-flos-is-es, or Hah-ko-kau-beam, the stars represented by numbers 22 and 23, receiving light from the revolutions of Kolob.

The phrase “is said by the Egyptians” ought to be a clue that this is a description of an Egyptian metaphor, not a literal scientific treatise. In other words, when we say “the sun rises in the East,” those words convey a valuable metaphorical meaning, even though they’re not at all scientifically accurate. The sun, of course, is well beyond the boundaries of the four cardinal directions, and it is the earth’s relative movement, not the sun’s, that accounts for this scientifically indefensible concept of “sunrise.”

On the other hand, I don’t see any reason why thermonuclear fusion couldn’t be a key component of “the medium of Kae-e-vanrash.”

8. There’s a book published in 1830 by Thomas Dick entitled *The Philosophy of the Future State*.

1830. A very good year, indeed. Same year, in fact, that the Church was organized and the Book of Mormon was published. Joseph was already pretty far down the road with Mormon theology by this point, so this book couldn’t have been included in all the stuff he supposedly plagiarized to write the Book of Mormon. Maybe this made for a bit of light reading after he was poring through *View of the Hebrews*, *The Late War between the United States and Great Britain*, *The First Book of Napoleon*, oodles of Captain Kidd stories, and dozens of obscure local and African maps.

But, okay, here we go. One more accusation of plagiarism. Excuse me for not being staggered, floored, or astounded. You can only cry wolf so many times.

Joseph Smith owned a copy of the book and Oliver Cowdery quoted some lengthy excerpts from the book in the [December 1836 *Messenger and Advocate*](#).

Indeed! And Oliver participated in the Book of Abraham translation process. Why would a plagiarist call attention to his source? A source which, just by reading the excerpt to which you link, clearly bears no textual resemblance to the Book of Abraham at all?

Klaus Hansen, an LDS scholar, stated:

Klaus Hansen? Am I supposed to know who he is? Why is it that the only LDS scholars you respect are those who agree with you, while those who disagree are just “unofficial apologists?”

But OK. What did the good Mr. Hansen state?

“The progressive aspect of Joseph’s theology, as well as its cosmology, while in a general way compatible with antebellum thought, bears some remarkable resemblances to Thomas Dick’s [‘*Philosophy of a Future State*’](#).”

That may be why Oliver chose to quote from him. I quote from C.S. Lewis on my blog all the time, because I’m thrilled to find a non-Mormon writer advancing what seem, to me, to be some very remarkable resemblances to Mormon ideas. To my knowledge, no one has accused me of plagiarism as a result, nor should it surprise us when people from different backgrounds arrive at similar philosophical conclusions. Because that’s what we’re talking about here – ideas that Thomas Dick had that bear some similarity to ideas in the Book of Abraham. Clearly none of Dick’s text can be found in the B of A, so insinuations of plagiarism are pretty silly.

Hansen continues:

“Some very striking parallels to Smith’s theology suggest that the similarities between the two may be more than coincidental. Dick’s lengthy book, an ambitious treatise on astronomy and metaphysics, proposed the idea that matter is eternal and indestructible...

Correct.

... and rejected the notion of a creation ex nihilo.

Incorrect.

“None but that Eternal Mind which counts the number of the stars, **which called them from nothing into existence**, and arranged them in the respective stations they occupy, and whose eyes run to and fro through the unlimited extent of creation, can form a clear and comprehensive conception of the number, the order, and the economy of this vast portion of the system of nature.” [Emphasis added]

- Thomas Dick, *Philosophy of a Future State*, pp. 206-207.

Calling things from “nothing into existence” is the very definition of ex nihilo creation, which Dick

clearly accepts and the Book of Abraham explicitly rejects. Mr. Dick has a bunch of other ideas that fly in the face of Mormon theology. His God is “a spiritual uncompounded substance, having no visible form, nor sensible quantities, ‘inhabiting eternity,’ and filling immensity with his presence, his essential glory cannot form an object for the direct contemplation of any finite intelligence.” (p.202) This deity also “existed alone, independent of every other being” for “[i]nnumerable ages before the universe was created.” (p. 56)

That’s about as un-Mormon – and un-Book of Abraham – as a God can possibly be.

Much of the book dealt with the infinity of the universe, made up of innumerable stars spread out over immeasurable distances. Dick speculated that many of these stars were peopled by “various orders of intelligences” and that these intelligences were “progressive beings” in various stages of evolution toward perfection.

Those, apparently, are the parts of the book that Oliver liked, which is why he quoted from them in the *Messenger and Advocate*. Like you, he apparently prefers to quote scholars when they agree with him.

In the Book of Abraham, part of which consists of a treatise on astronomy and cosmology, eternal beings of various orders and stages of development likewise populate numerous stars. They, too, are called “intelligences.”

Same name, yes, but with entirely different functions. Dick’s divine intelligence is completely and forever removed from every other intelligence, all of which is far too limited and weak to ever understand the Eternal Mind. Abraham 3, where God steps into the midst of intelligences and proclaims “These I shall make my rulers” is antithetical to Dick’s conception of deity.

Dick speculated that “the systems of the universe revolve around a common centre...the throne of God.” In the Book of Abraham, one star named Kolob “was nearest unto the throne of God.”

“Therefore are they before the **throne of God**, and serve him day and night in his temple: and he that sitteth on the throne shall dwell among them.” – Revelation 7:15

“And he that shall swear by heaven, sweareth by the **throne of God**, and by him that sitteth thereon.” – Matthew 23:22

“Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the **throne of God**.” - Hebrews 12:2

Emphasis added in all above biblical passages. There are plenty more. The “throne of God” even makes several appearances in the Book of Mormon, which was published before Joseph got his hands on *Philosophy of a Future State*. Incredible as it may seem, this is proof that Joseph could have thought of using this three-word phrase without Thomas Dick’s help.

Other stars, in ever diminishing order, were placed in increasing distances from this center.” – Mormonism and the American Experience, Klaus Hansen, p.79-80, 110

I'd very much like to read the rest of this passage from Klaus Hansen, as the few articles I can find of his suggest that he's a faithful Latter-day Saint. I don't have a copy of his book, and the text is unavailable online. It would be interesting to see if these observations are tempered by a broader context that you neglect to cite, as I suspect they probably are.

9. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland was directly asked about the papyri not matching the Book of Abraham in a March 2012 BBC interview:

Sweeney: Mr. Smith got this papyri and he translated them and subsequently as the Egyptologists cracked the code something completely different...

Holland: (Interrupts) All I'm saying...all I'm saying is that what got translated got translated into the word of God. The vehicle for that, I do not understand and don't claim to know and know no Egyptian.

Is "I don't know and I don't understand but it's the word of God" really the best answer that a "prophet, seer, and revelator" can come up with to such a profound problem that is driving many members out of the Church?

Is paraphrasing Elder Holland to torture his words into sounding more ignorant than they actually were really the best way to make your argument?

Elder Holland didn't say "I don't know and I don't understand but it's the word of God." What he said was that he didn't understand "the vehicle for that," meaning the means of translation, and that he didn't know Egyptian. If you actually watched the documentary, which [I did at the time](#), you'd recognize that Sweeney was about as obnoxious to Elder Holland as he could have possibly been. Elder Holland's patience and grace under hostile fire was impressive by any objective standard.

This may be a tangent, but that documentary merits additional comment. Throughout the piece John Sweeney gets all the simple details wrong. For example, he constantly refers to chapels as temples; yet when he stands outside the Boston Temple, he claims Mitt Romney was "a bishop here." Well, no. As any Mormon knows, regular meetinghouses and temples serve very different purposes. If someone's going to warn the world about Mitt's scary cult, which was the purpose of the piece, maybe they should get the little things right if they want us to trust the, on the big things.

It's clear who Sweeney trusts, though – dissidents. He spends about twenty minutes interviewing modern polygamists who have zero connection to the church to which Mitt Romney belongs, and then another twenty or so interviewing unstable people who've left the church, one of whom claims to have been "followed," although whether or not it was the church that was following him, he can't be sure. Sweeney makes one offhand comment that the vast majority of the people who knew Mitt as a bishop really liked and respected him, but that comment comes before a lengthy interview with the one woman who didn't.

That's the approach. If you hate the Mormons, then you're honest and credible. If you like them, then you're hiding something.

Sound familiar, Jeremy?

At one point in Sweeney's piece, some wackadoodle, random hairy dude claims that Mormon spies are trained by the CIA to learn how to snoop on church members' private lives. Sweeney then cuts to a spooky shot of the Church Office Building and scarily intones that he has contacted a CIA agent "who refuses to reveal his name." This CIA wannabe Deep Throat confirms... that the CIA does, in fact, employ Mormons. That's it. That's the smoking gun evidence of some secret Mormon spy network. No word if Lutherans who work for the CIA are also being trained to spy on parishioners.

After giving full hearing to reports by the angriest people imaginable about all the horrors of Mormonism, he then ambushes Elder Holland and asks him to deny these horrors, which he does, after which Sweeney presents some variation of "Oh, sure, Elder Holland. You may claim that you don't follow people and shun people and cut them out of their families, but I've found thirty people" – Sweeney's own, admitted number – "who beg to differ."

That's the tone of this piece – thirty loopy, ex-Mormon cranks vs. the entire faithful membership of the LDS Church, the whole of which gets about a fifth of the total screen time.

But you're right – as he was being badgered by a hostile interviewer who was unwilling to give him time to respond, Elder Holland did not provide a comprehensive understanding of the Book of Abraham in the five seconds he was allotted before the next question. Or perhaps he did go on at length, and Sweeney left it on the cutting room floor. Making Elder Holland look good was not on John Sweeney's agenda.

The following are respected Egyptian scholars/Egyptologists statements regarding Joseph Smith and the Book of Abraham:

"...these three facsimiles of Egyptian documents in the Pearl of Great Price depict the most common objects in the Mortuary religion of Egypt. Joseph Smith's interpretations of them as part of a unique revelation through Abraham, therefore, very clearly demonstrates that he was totally unacquainted with the significance of these documents and absolutely ignorant of the simplest facts of Egyptian writing and civilization."

– Dr. James H. Breasted, University of Chicago

"It may be safely said that there is not one single word that is true in these explanations..." – Dr. W.M. Flinders Petrie, London University

"It is difficult to deal seriously with Joseph Smith's impudent fraud...Smith has turned the goddess [Isis in Facsimile #3] into a king and Osiris into Abraham."

– Dr. A.H. Sayce, Oxford professor of Egyptology

Man. You left all the big guns for the end, didn't you? If you had all these respected Egyptian scholars in your back pocket, why did you keep trotting out the guy who wrote Saturday's *Voyeur* to make your case?

I'd like to see what else Dr. James H. Breasted has to say on the subject. Is he still teaching at the University of Chicago? No, he isn't, probably because he's been dead for over eighty years. Same with A.H. Sayce. Flinders Petrie is the kid of the group – he died in 1942. All these statements were made over a hundred years ago in the service of an anti-Mormon tract published by Franklin Spalding, an

Episcopal bishop. All of them would have believed Egyptological ideas that modern scholars would now reject, based on the most current research available. Certainly all of them precede the flood of Book of Abraham scholarship that has taken place since the Joseph Smith Papyri were discovered in 1967.

Hugh Nibley, who I quote in fire red again, absolutely destroys these guys.

At that time it was claimed that the pronouncements of five of the greatest scholars of all time had “completely demolished” all grounds for belief in the divine inspiration or historic authenticity of the Book of Abraham and, through it, the Book of Mormon. It turned out, however, that Bishop Franklin S. Spalding, in gathering and manipulating the necessary evidence for his determined and devious campaign, had (1) disqualified the Mormons from all participation in the discussion on the grounds that they were not professional Egyptologists; (2) sent special warnings and instructions to his experts that made it impossible for any of them to decide for Joseph Smith; (3) concealed all correspondence that did not support the verdict he desired; (4) given the learned jury to understand that the original Egyptian manuscripts were available, which they were not; (5) said that Mormons claimed them to be the unique autobiographic writings and sketching of Abraham, which they did not; (6) announced to the world that Joseph Smith was being tested on linguistic grounds alone, specifically as a translator, though none of his experts ventured to translate a single word of the documents submitted; and (7) rested his case on the “complete agreement” of the scholars, who agreed on nothing save that the Book of Abraham was a hoax.

The experts (1) did not agree among themselves at all when they spoke without collusion; (2) with the exception of James H. Breasted, they wrote only brief and contemptuous notes, though it was claimed that they had given the documents “careful consideration”; (3) they admitted that they were hasty and ill-tempered, since they at no time considered anything of Joseph Smith’s worth any serious attention at all; (4) they translated nothing and produced none of the “identical” documents, which, according to them, were available in countless numbers and proved Joseph Smith’s interpretations a fraud. They should have done much better than they did since they had everything their own way, being free to choose for interpretation and comment whatever was easiest and most obvious, and to pass by in complete silence the many formidable problems presented by the three facsimiles. Those Mormons who ventured a few polite and diffident questions about the consistency of the criticisms or the completeness of the evidence instantly called down upon their heads the Jovian bolts of the New York Times, accusing them of “reviling scholars and scholarship.” A safer setup for the critics of Joseph Smith could not be imagined. And yet it was they and not the Mormons who insisted on calling off the whole show just when it was getting interesting. It was not a very edifying performance.

- From “A New Look at the History of the Pearl of Great Price” published in [The Improvement Era, May, 1970](#).

Yeah, maybe the flying violin dude was your best bet after all.

The Church conceded in its [July 2014 Translation and Historicity of the Book of Abraham essay](#) that Joseph’s translations of the papyri and the facsimiles do not match what’s in the Book of Abraham.

Wrong. The Church announced to the world that the papyri did not match what’s in the Book of Abraham two months after the papyri were found.

From the cover story of the [January 1968 edition of The Improvement Era](#)

*Some of the pieces of papyrus apparently include conventional hieroglyphics (sacred inscriptions, resembling picture-drawing) and hieratic (a cursive shorthand version of hieroglyphics) **Egyptian funerary texts**, which were commonly buried with Egyptian mummies. Often the funerary texts contained passages from the "**Book of the Dead**," a book that was to assist in the safe passage of the dead person into the spirit world. **It is not known at this time whether the ten other pieces of papyri have a direct connection with the Book of Abraham.***

Emphasis added.

Since that time, there have been countless admissions that the text of the JS Papyri does not match the text of the Book of Abraham. I remember reading this article on my mission – [“Why doesn’t the translation of the Egyptian papyri found in 1967 match the text of the Book of Abraham in the Pearl of Great Price?”](#) It was published in the July 1988 edition of the Ensign. Your statement implies that the Church only first “conceded” these facts in 2014, which is demonstrably false. There has never been any attempt by the Church to claim that the Joseph Smith Papyri contains the text of the Book of Abraham. It is patently dishonest to suggest otherwise.

Of all of the issues, the Book of Abraham is the issue that has both fascinated and disturbed me the most. It is the issue that I’ve spent the most time researching on because it offers a real insight into Joseph’s modus operandi as well as Joseph’s claim of being a translator. It is the smoking gun that has completely obliterated my testimony of Joseph Smith and his claims.

This makes me very sad, indeed. It is always a tragedy when someone loses their faith, but I consider it especially tragic when someone’s testimony is obliterated because of misunderstandings, bad information, and logically fallacious assumptions like the kind you present in your letter. The gun is smoking because you have unwittingly shot yourself in the foot.

Polygamy/Polyandry Concerns & Questions:

One of the things that really disturbed me in my research was discovering the real origins of polygamy and how Joseph Smith really practiced it.

This is an interesting way to describe your objections to polygamy. It implies that you’re not, in the abstract, upset that polygamy was practiced, but its “real origins” and Joseph Smith’s personal polygamy was uniquely and egregiously wicked in and of itself.

Seems like we’re going to be talking about plural marriage for quite awhile, so I thought I’d begin with my personal overview on the subject. My great-grandfather was Heber J. Grant, who had three wives. My grandmother was his youngest daughter, and she lived in hiding for twelve years, raised by her sister and unable to use her real name. It’s undeniable that the whole history of polygamy in the LDS Church is fraught with difficulty, and everyone would just as soon forget that it ever happened. That’s pretty hard to do, though, especially since it was the defining doctrine of the church for about half a century. So where there ought to be frank discussion, too often there’s awkward silence.

That's mainly because modern Mormons find the practice abhorrent, including me. I had never met an actual polygamist until I moved to St. George and saw polygamous women crowding into the local Wal-Mart and Costco, their dowdy homespun dresses and strange, braided, non-bangs hair making them stick out like sore thumbs. I had been operating under the illusion that my ancestors weren't nearly this weird, but that's much harder to do when confronted with actual polygamists. My ancestors were probably were just as weird. Maybe even weirder.

Where does that leave me?

Still in denial, at least to a degree. Because, first off, my grandmother *wasn't* weird. She was an accomplished woman who, to my knowledge, was never forced to wear an ugly burlap dress or yank her hair back in a strange, swooshy coiffure. I don't know when dowdiness became part and parcel with the polygamy experience, but they could certainly do without it. And in the second place, I've seen no evidence that the systemic physical and sexual abuse that is rampant in these polygamous subcultures was part of polygamy back in the day.

Yet the modern practice of polygamy invites everyone to imagine the worst.

Every young Mormon missionary is deluged with questions about polygamy, and few of them give substantive or satisfying answers. Some talk about the glut of single ladies on the frontier who needed the protection of a land-owning husband, so Mormon men dutifully obliged them in a historical anomaly that vanished when conditions changed. I've never used that line, because, frankly, it's not true. Polygamy was always a religious principle, and to minimize its importance in the early history of the church is the height of disingenuity. But it's a principle that repulses me in practice, so how do I reconcile its previous sanction by my church with my present faith?

I do it the same way the Book of Mormon does.

Many anti-Mormons take delight in pointing out that the Book of Mormon rails on polygamy with more ferocity than anything in the Bible. The Lord condemns the unauthorized practice of polygamy as an "abomination" and refers to the taking of multiple wives as "whoredoms," and then says the following:

"Wherefore, my brethren, hear me, and hearken to the word of the Lord: For there shall not any man among you have save it be one wife; and concubines he shall have none." (Jacob 2:27)

That seems to be a pretty clear-cut standard, which makes you wonder how Joseph Smith could possibly lead the church to go contrary to the plain language of the scripture he himself translated.

Until you read on to verse 30:

"For if I will, saith the Lord of Hosts, raise up seed unto me, I will command my people; otherwise they shall hearken unto these things."

In other words, monogamy is the norm, unless commanded otherwise by the Lord to "raise up seed" unto Him. That's exactly what happened when the Church practiced polygamy in the 19th century. The doctrine bound the church together through a torturous time and raised up a large second generation to

carry the gospel forward. And now, when it is no longer necessary, the Lord has commanded us to revert back to the norm.

Still, while the doctrine seems clear, the practice remains disturbing, to me and to most other Mormons I know. I appreciate the essays on this subject, and I view them as solid first steps towards coming to terms with our past.

So let's see if we can confront this issue together.

Joseph Smith was married to at least 34 women.

Yes, no, and sort of. The Wikipedia list you link to includes several disputed names, but, more importantly it makes no distinction between marriages and sealings. That distinction is essential, because Joseph was married – i.e. sealed – to dozens of other women, most of them after his death. Heber J. Grant's father Jedidiah M. Grant stood proxy as his wife was sealed to Joseph Smith. Much of the confusion over polyandry is explained by the fact that Joseph was sealed to other men's wives but not married to them. We'll no doubt discuss that crucial distinction going forward, because it's one you repeatedly ignore.

Polyandry: Of those 34 women, 11 of them were married women of other living men.

Yep. There it is.

Joseph married lots of women, and some of them were, in fact, already married at the time. Yet in plural marriages where Joseph married other men's wives, the supposed cuckolds knew about this arrangement, sanctioned it, and, what's more, went on to live with their wives as they had before Joseph Smith came on the scene. Never mind Joseph Smith – what husband would allow such a thing? What on earth was going on?

The answer, as I foreshadowed earlier, comes from an understanding of the difference between a marriage and a sealing. Because there is a crucial difference, especially in the early years of the Church. And, not to put too fine a point on it, that difference is sex. (More on that later.)

The word “seal” comes from D&C 132:45, where the Lord says to Joseph Smith, “[W]hatsoever you [i.e. Joseph Smith] seal on earth shall be sealed in heaven; and whatsoever you bind on earth, in my name and by my word, saith the Lord, it shall be eternally bound in the heavens.” This “sealing power” is thought by Mormons to be identical to the authority given to the apostle Peter in the New Testament as written in Matthew 18:18 – “Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” Binding/sealing a couple with this authority perpetuates family bonds beyond the grave.

Today, the word “sealing” is often synonymous with “marriage,” but not always. Children, for instance, are “sealed” in temple ceremonies to their parents. Joseph saw all of this as part of his role in the “restitution of all things” mentioned in Acts 3:21. That included restoring both the sealing, or binding, power mentioned earlier, along with the ancient practice of plural marriage.

Evidence suggests that what happened in the so-called “polyandry” was that Joseph drew a distinction between sealing and regular marriage. Some married women were sealed to Joseph, but, in this life, they stayed faithful to their husbands, who were aware of the sealing and consented to it. Many more women, including my own great-great grandmother, were sealed to Joseph after his death.

Back to the sexual question, the record indicates that Joseph had sex with women to whom he was both married and sealed. When Joseph was sealed to a woman but not married to her, sexual relations would have constituted adultery, and they were absent from the relationship. There is no solid evidence to suggest that Joseph slept with the women who remained married to other men, and not much in the way of flimsy evidence, either.

Those who claim that the doctrine of plural marriage was a convenient outlet for Joseph’s libido overlook the reality of how Joseph actually conducted himself in living this principle.

There were no orgies or harems. A large number of his plural wives got a wedding ceremony and nothing else. Offshoots of the mainstream LDS Church, notably the Community of Christ, insist Joseph couldn’t possibly have been a polygamist. After all, how could a man be married to over two dozen women and father children with none of them? The answer is that Joseph did not view polygamy as a license for licentiousness, and how he lived this doctrine defies the modern caricatures that have sprung up around it.

Again, understand the narrowness of my point. I’m not saying polygamy is wonderful, and I concede it is strange and disturbing. What I am saying is that it wasn’t the sexual free-for-all that your suggesting with accusations of polyandry, and all this needs to be understood in its proper historical and theological context.

Also, I’m probably going to have to say the word “sex” a lot, mainly to deny its inclusion in Joseph’s non-marriage sealings. I know that, puritanically speaking, we got into trouble about this sort of thing when we had to acknowledge that God has genitalia, but the main objection to polyandry is the idea that Joseph was sleeping with other men’s wives, and Joseph wasn’t sleeping with other men’s wives. He was sealed to them in a religious ceremony, and then these women continued sleeping with their lawful husbands.

That’s an odd arrangement by modern standards, surely, but it’s not consistent with the caricature you’re trying to perpetuate.

Among them being Apostle Orson Hyde who was sent on his mission to dedicate Israel when Joseph secretly married his wife, Marinda Hyde.

Not true. Joseph may have been sealed to Marinda Hyde – the reports are conflicting, and they only come from antagonistic sources – but this would have been a sealing and not a marriage. Marinda Hyde continued to live with Orson Hyde long afterward, and she was sealed to him after his death, even though they had been divorced. It has never been church policy to seal a woman to two men, so the fact that Marinda was sealed to Orson and not Joseph suggests that the sealing of Joseph and Marinda may have been fabricated by church critics. Regardless, there is zero evidence that Joseph and Marinda had a sexual relationship.

Church historian Elder Marlin K. Jensen and unofficial apologists like FairMormon do not dispute the polyandry. The Church now admits the polyandry in its October 2014 Plural Marriage in Kirtland and Nauvoo essay.

Not true, at least not in the context you suggest. Elder Jensen, FairMormon, and the Church's essay admit to sealings, not to sex. Footnote 30 from the Church's essay:

*Polyandry, the marriage of one woman to more than one man, typically involves shared financial, residential, and sexual resources, and children are often raised communally. There is no evidence that Joseph Smith's sealings functioned in this way, and **much evidence works against that view.*** [Emphasis added.]

Out of the 34 women, 7 of them were teenage girls as young as 14-years-old.

Precisely one of the girls Joseph was sealed to – Helen Mar Kimball – was 14 years old. The rest were older than sixteen, which was marriageable age in the 19th Century. And the evidence suggests that the sealing to Helen Mar Kimball was a sealing only, not a marriage. She continued to live with her parents, who approved the sealing, and Joseph was dead a year later. No sex.

Joseph was 37-years-old when he married 14-year-old Helen Mar Kimball, twenty-three years his junior. Even by 19th century standards, this was shocking.

It's also not true, at least in the way you're implying. Joseph was sealed in a dynastic union to Helen Mar Kimball, not married in the shocking – i.e. sexual – sense. He never lived with her, and he never slept with her. Helen later married Horace Whitney when she was 18 and bore him eleven children.

The Church now admits that Joseph Smith married Helen Mar Kimball “several months before her 15th birthday” in its October 2014 Plural Marriage in Kirtland and Nauvoo essay.

Using phrases like “the Church now admits” suggests that the prior to 2014, the Church didn't acknowledge that this sealing had taken place. That's simply not true. Helen herself wrote two manuals published by the Church in the late 19th Century in which she defends plural marriage and acknowledges her sealing to Joseph Smith. Official admissions by the Church took place over a hundred years before the Church's recent essay.

Among the women was a mother-daughter set and three sister sets.

Well, at least they had someone to talk to at family reunions! Honestly, how does this make polygamy even worse? Would you have found polygamy acceptable if Joseph only married women who were unrelated to each other? This is just piling on for the sake of piling on.

Several of these women included Joseph's own foster daughters.

Joseph didn't have any foster daughters. The foster parenting system in the United States wasn't instituted until 1853, so this would not have been a label anyone in Joseph Smith's era would have recognized.

Some of the marriages to these women included promises by Joseph of eternal life to the girls and their families, threats of loss of salvation, and threats that he (Joseph) was going to be slain by an angel with a drawn sword if the girls didn't marry him.

Promises of eternal blessings? Yes. Threats of loss of salvation? None. Threats that Joseph would be killed by an angel with a drawn sword if girls didn't marry him? Wrong. You're conflating a bunch of different and disparate events into one ugly mess to make Joseph look as seedy as possible.

Let's address each one with the appropriate context.

No question Joseph promised eternal blessings to both his wives and their families should they consent to live this principle. Richard Bushman, in answering the question as to why a husband would consent to having their wives sealed to Joseph, said that the "only answer seems to be the explanation Joseph gave when he asked a woman for her consent: they and their families would benefit spiritually from a close tie to the Prophet." (Rough Stone Rolling, p. 439) This kind of explanation demonstrates that these marriages functioned in a spiritual rather than a carnal context. If Joseph really were just trying to bed as many women as he possibly could, he constructed a very inefficient vehicle for that process.

As for threats of hellfire should a woman refuse him, there aren't any. If you have them, you ought to produce them. Yes, there are second-hand accusations from critics of Joseph that were leveled long after the fact, but no woman to whom Joseph proposed or married provides a firsthand account of such a thing.

A columnist named Mike Adams, in order to smear Mormonism during the Mitt Romney campaign, thought he'd found one in the case of Lucy Walker. "I am sorry that after her mother died, Joseph Smith approached teenager Lucy Walker with a command that she marry Smith with the threat of eternal damnation as the punishment if she refused," [Adams wrote](#). "I am sorry that the year before Joseph Smith died, he said the following to Lucy: 'I will give you until tomorrow to decide (whether to marry me). If you reject this message the gate will be closed forever against you.'"

Game over, right? Well, just like your accusation, there is much about this story that Adams isn't telling you, because it doesn't make for nearly as sordid a tale.

To begin with, I can find no direct quote with reference to this marriage citing eternal damnation, hell, or anything similar in either Lucy Walker's writings or anyone else's. It is likely, then, that Joseph said anything like that in his proposal, as, if he did, that would likely be the money quote that would prove, beyond question, that Joseph was a beast. The best Adams has got is this bit about "the gate will be closed forever."

What gate?

The insinuation is that this is the "Pearly Gate," the gate to heaven, and that, if he turned the prophet down, the door to paradise would be slammed in her face. But that's a really odd formulation, especially since Mormon theology rejects a static heaven or hell. Something else is clearly going on here.

In addition, Joseph had recently excommunicated John C. Bennett – no relation to yours truly – because this was his M.O. in picking up ladies – he tried to make them “spiritual wives” and threatened hellfire if they didn’t sleep with him. Joseph found this reprehensible and booted him out of the church. Seems unlikely, then, that he would then turn around and apply the same tactics, especially since none of his other wives reported this kind of threat.

So what’s the full story?

It begins four months prior to the supposed hellfire ultimatum. He taught Lucy Walker the principle of plural marriage and then proposed to her, and she said no, absolutely not. “Oh that the grave would kindly receive me that I might find rest of the bosom of my dear mother!” she wrote, but four months before she consented, not 24 hours. Four *months*. And during that time, Joseph didn’t mention the proposal at all. He finally approached her and issued the money quote with the gate in it, which Lucy Walker refused emphatically. If she truly feared eternal torment as a consequence of her defiance, it was unlikely that she would be comfortable writing, as she did, that after she shut him down she would “emphatically forbid him speaking again to me on this Subject.”

Joseph, rather than bring out the fire and brimstone, did something else entirely. From Lucy Walker’s writings:

“He walked across the room, returned, and stood before me. With the most beautiful expression of countenance, he said, ‘God almighty bless you. You shall have a manifestation of the will of God concerning you; a testimony that you can never deny. I will tell you what it shall be. It shall be that peace and joy that you never knew.’”

“God almighty bless you?” Peace and joy? That’s not quite “Demons will feast upon your innards,” is it?

Incidentally, Joseph’s promise, according to Lucy Walker, was fulfilled to the letter. In her own words, with her own poor spelling:

“My room became filled with a heavenly influence. To me it was in comparison like the brilliant sun bursting through the darkest cloud... My Soul was filled with a calm, sweet peace that I never knew. Supreme happiness took possession of my whole being. And I received a powerful and irristable testimony of the truth of the marriage covenant called ‘Celestial or plural mariage.’ Which has been like an anchor to the soul through all the trials of life.”

So the entire denial-of-salvation case against Joseph in this case rests on one word – gate. What did Joseph mean that the gate would be forever closed? In context, it looks as if he’s talking about the opportunity to marry him. He’d given her four months; she’d put him off. He finally said, “Look, fish or cut bait.” And her refusal even on that occasion spurred Joseph’s kindness, not threats. Try as he might, Mike Adams can’t really shoehorn this experience into a John C. Bennett kind of nightmare. (Again, no relation. At all.)

The story of the angel with the drawn sword is especially dramatic, and it comes from several different sources. But absolutely no account exists where Joseph told anyone that an angel would slay him if a specific woman didn’t marry him. The angel appeared due to Joseph’s reluctance to engage in plural

marriage as a general principle. This story was never used as leverage to get a woman to agree to marry Joseph.

I have a problem with this. This is [Warren Jeffs territory](#).

Actually, this is precisely the opposite of the way Warren Jeffs, a convicted pedophile, conducted the principle of plural marriage. Joseph saw plural marriage as a religious principle to bind families together, not a license for sexual adventurism. He was sealed to dozens of women with whom he had no sexual relations, and he did not have sexual relations with any underage women. There is no evidence of coercion, and there is solid evidence that he took no for an answer. Jeffs, on the other hand, forced underage girls to marry and have sex with himself and other men or be damned forever. You're trying to drag Joseph Smith into Warren Jeffs territory, but the facts don't support you in that effort.

This is not the Joseph Smith I grew up learning about in the Church and having a testimony of.

That's because this is not the Joseph Smith that is Joseph Smith. The Warren Jeffs-like Joseph Smith that you're describing here is a grotesque caricature of the real thing.

Keep in mind that of the 34 women you're talking about, 33 of them were married after 1841. By June of 1844, Joseph Smith was dead. All of these weddings, then, took place during a compressed three-and-a-half year time frame that was the busiest period of Joseph's life, when he was doing a great many of the things you were telling people about on your mission. This was when he was building the second-largest city in Illinois and the largest religious building in the country, as well as leading a rapidly expanding church and, oh yeah, running for President of the United States. For most of these sealings, the wives got a ceremony and nothing more.

It's noteworthy, too, that Joseph fathered nine children with Emma, yet, as far as has been verified, he had no children with any of his other wives. That alone is the basis for the specious RLDS claim that Joseph couldn't have been a polygamist after all. While that doesn't prove any such thing, it does suggest that sex was not the only or even the primary motivation for these marriages. It demonstrates that plural marriage does not negate everything else Joseph Smith was and did, and that you're condemning him based on a series of assumptions that don't match the record.

This is not the Joseph Smith that I sang "Praise to the Man" to or taught others about two years in the mission field.

Are you saying that when you served a mission, you didn't know Joseph Smith was a polygamist? When investigators brought up polygamy, did you assume they were lying? That's astonishing to me. I don't know how anyone could spend more than a week in the mission field and not know this information.

A lot of members don't realize that there is a set of very specific and bizarre rules outlined in [Doctrine & Covenants 132](#) (still in LDS canon despite President Hinckley publicly stating that polygamy is not doctrinal) on how polygamy is to be practiced.

You're getting very legalistic here. The context of President Hinckley's statement suggests that he was

not disavowing previous polygamy but, instead, drawing a distinction between the past and present. He was absolutely correct in saying that it is not doctrinal to practice plural marriage today. (I can think of no faster route to excommunication from the Church than becoming a polygamist.) His statement is consistent with the passage in Jacob 2: monogamy is the doctrinal norm, but there are periods in history where the Lord requires polygamous exceptions to the rule.

As for the “specific and bizarre rules,” I find that a puzzling construct. Aren’t rules, by their nature, supposed to be specific? There are specific rules as to how to play baseball, for instance. If there weren’t, the game would be unplayable. (“Rule 17: The batter should probably stop batting after he gets a bunch of strikes.”) As to the idea that “a lot of members don’t realize” what these rules are, one wonders why they can’t read the revelation itself, which the Church has been printing as scripture for 175 years or so.

As to whether the rules are “bizarre,” we’ll address those with the examples you provide below.

It is the kind of revelation you’d expect from the likes of Warren Jeffs to his FLDS followers.

No, it is the kind of revelation *you’d* expect from the likes of Warren Jeffs to his FLDS followers. Or, to be more precise, you provide a flawed analysis of the revelation because you deliberately misinterpret Section 132 to match your own expectations, which are rooted in inaccurate and distorted information. This tells me a great deal about your expectations and nothing about Section 132.

The only form of polygamy permitted by D&C 132 is a union with a virgin after first giving the opportunity to the first wife to consent to the marriage.

This is inaccurate, but before I point out why it’s inaccurate, I want to take several steps back and point out how far down the rabbit hole you’re going here.

Your accusations are premised on the idea that Joseph invented polygamy to have sex with a lot of women, including underage girls. That was John C. Bennett’s M.O. – his “spiritual wifery,” which had no accompanying revelation to justify it, involved him telling married women that they should sleep with him because they were “spiritually married,” so they could do as they pleased with their husbands none the wiser. That strikes me as a far more effective method to achieve easy sexual gratification – no rules, no boundaries, and no responsibility.

Joseph’s plural marriage, however, didn’t operate like this at all. Sex was not a part of most of these relationships. He married old widows who never saw after the ceremony. He was sealed to married women who never had any significant relationship with him, sexual or otherwise, and who continued to live as wives to their existing husbands. And the revelation which authorized Joseph to do all this set very clear guidelines as to what was appropriate and what was not, including strict prohibition of the kind of polyandry of which you accuse him.

So now here you are, criticizing Joseph for practicing polygamy because of his supposed sexual licentiousness, and then you turn around and lay out reasons why Joseph wasn’t actually following his own revelation. Do you see the exasperating futility of what you’re doing? What if, for instance, it could be demonstrated – and I think it can be demonstrated – that Joseph’s behavior was consistent with the boundaries set in Section 132? Would you be okay with polygamy then? If not, then what’s the

point?

You've settled on the idea that this is all just Joseph the Fraud creating a flimsy pretext to justify adultery, yet you then nitpick here and adopt a tortured legalistic interpretation of Section 132 to indict him for not living up to the rules of his own fraud. The fact that he made any rules at all is a clear argument *against* fraud. L. Ron Hubbard, founder of Scientology, once wrote a note to himself in which he said "All men are your slaves." Surely Joseph could have given himself similar license if Section 132 was solely a product of his imagination. Maybe something like "Verily, I say unto you, my servant Joseph, that all women are given to you to do with as you will." See how easy that was? Why would a sexual predator make things as difficult as Section 132 did for Joseph?

If it's a fraud, then the rules don't matter, and you're just looking for more excuses to berate Joseph Smith.

This is one of the reasons why so many responses to your letter have been more dismissive than perhaps they should have been. Because all the questions you ask aren't really questions at all – they're indictments. They couldn't get Al Capone on racketeering and murder charges, so they got him on tax evasion. Similarly, if you can't tear down Joseph Smith on the basis of him being a simple pervert, then you can get him on the contradictory charge of not following his own revelation. You don't care if people believe that Joseph plagiarized *View of the Hebrews* or the *First Book of Napoleon* just as long as they don't believe the Book of Mormon is what it claims to be. This explodes the premise that you're "just asking questions." You're not inquiring; you're carpet bombing. You're throwing everything you can find at the Church the hopes that at least something will stick.

If the first wife doesn't consent, the husband is exempt and may still take an additional wife, but the first wife must at least have the opportunity to consent. In case the first wife doesn't consent, she will be "destroyed". Also, the new wife must be a virgin before the marriage and be completely monogamous after the marriage or she will be destroyed (D&C 132: 41 & 63).

You're leaning pretty heavily on the word "virgin," as if God expects every sealing to be preceded by a medical exam a la Princess Diana before her wedding to Prince Charles. I don't think that interpretation of the word is at all consistent with the context or how the Lord views sexual purity.

Consider a victim of sexual assault, who, medically speaking, is no longer a virgin. D&C 132 still provides the doctrinal template for how monogamous sealings are performed today, and under your legalistic interpretation of this scripture, innocent victims would not be eligible to be sealed in the temple, despite the fact that they have done nothing wrong. The more appropriate contextual understanding of the word "virgin" here is a woman who is sexually pure in the eyes of God. So even a repentant adulterer would not be disqualified, because the Lord has said that when we repent of our sins, he will "remember them no more." (D&C 58:42)

As for wives being "destroyed," no doubt that's some pretty harsh language. Almost as harsh as "damned." In the context of what's being described, however, it has a unique spiritual application that you're deliberately missing. D&C 132 outlines the nature of exaltation, which is a continuation of posterity throughout the eternities. But when a river is damned, it does not continue. So it is when a person is damned – their posterity is capped. The destruction being talked about here is not being hit by a meteor or run over by a bus. It's the destruction of the opportunity to have eternal increase.

It is interesting that the only prerequisite that is mentioned for the man is that he must desire another wife: “if any man espouse a virgin, and desire to espouse another...”. It does not say that the man must get a specific revelation from the living prophet, although **we assume today that this is what was meant.**

Sorry for adding emphasis, but this last phrase is critically instructive. Are we wrong to assume that? Why? Generations of Latter-day Saints have read Section 132 and not reached the conclusion that just wanting more wives was all that was necessary to justify marrying them. But they’re all wrong, and you’re the only one smart enough to get it right? There are so many other qualifiers in this very complex and far-reaching revelation with regard to when marriage is appropriate, but you cherry-pick a single sentence and presume it simply obliterates everything else.

So much of your rejection of the church is rooted in the idea that every word in the revelations has a singular and self-evident meaning, so when anyone else interprets those words differently than you do, they’re obviously wrong. But if that were the case, then there would be no division in the Christian world, as everyone could read the Bible and never disagree about what it means. This is the reason living prophets are essential. Revelation is necessary not just to tell us new doctrine, but to give us greater understanding of the doctrine we already have.

D&C 132 is unequivocal on the point that polygamy is permitted only “to multiply and replenish the earth” and “bear the souls of men.” This would be consistent with the Book of Mormon prohibition on polygamy except in the case where God commands it to [“raise up seed.”](#)

There are a lot more words between “multiply and replenish the earth” and “bear the souls of me” that you fail to cite. Here is the text in its entirety, from verse 62: “for they are given unto him to multiply and replenish the earth, according to my commandment, **and** to fulfil the promise which was given by my Father before the foundation of the world, **and for their exaltation in the eternal worlds, that they may bear the souls of men.**” [Emphasis added.]

If you want to get legalistic, we can get legalistic. Just for fun, let’s parse the snot out of this.

This phrase begins with multiplying and replenishing as a primary justification. Then we get the word “and” thrown in there. You’re reading this as if it says “they are given unto him to multiply and replenish the earth, according to my commandment, **in order to** fulfil the promise...” But that’s not what it says. “And” suggests we’re about to get a second reason, not a clarification of the first. In fact, a tight, strict-constructionist reading of this verse reveals three different and distinct reasons for plural marriage, not “only” the replenishment of the earth, as you contend. (You also mistakenly assume that “bear the souls of men” is a reiteration of “multiply and replenish the earth.” That’s a pretty big mistake, as I will shortly demonstrate.)

So what are the three reasons?

1. Multiply and replenish the earth. You’re right; D&C 132 is unequivocal on this point, just as it is unequivocal on the two points that follow.
2. Fulfil “the promise which was given by my Father before the foundation of the world.”

What promise? This seems to have reference to the “restitution of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began.” (Acts 3:21) Joseph often cited the need to restore ancient practices to prepare for the Second Coming as a justification for polygamy, and this verse provides a credible scriptural context for him to do so.

So just relying on this phrase – plural marriage is acceptable because it fulfills God’s promises – would be justification enough for the practice, at least according to D&C 132.

3. For “their exaltation in the eternal worlds, **that** they may bear the souls of men.”

Oh, this one’s my favorite. Notice the emphasis I added on the “that.” The word appears there to create a conditional clause. You claim the bearing of souls is the same thing as multiplying and replenishing the earth, but the actual text insists that the bearing of the souls of men will only be made possible by “exaltation in the eternal worlds.” This is a promise of eternal increase, of bearing souls after the earth is no longer around to be replenished. Big, big difference.

And right here, with Reason #3, we have a clear rationale and justification for Joseph being sealed to women with whom he made no attempts to multiply and replenish the earth – i.e. no sex.

Again, looking at how polygamy was actually practiced by Joseph Smith:

Joseph married 11 women who were already married. Multiple husbands = Polyandry.

Sealings, not marriages. No sex. Not polyandry.

These married women continued to live as husband and wife with their first husband after marrying Joseph.

Which is compelling evidence that Joseph wasn’t sleeping with them.

Joseph’s polygamy also included:

Unions with teenagers as young as 14-years-old.

One fourteen year old, to whom he was sealed and not married. No sex.

Unions without the knowledge or consent of first wife Emma.

Also unions with the knowledge and consent of first wife Emma.

Unions without the knowledge or consent of the husband, in cases of polyandry.

Possibly not true. Almost all so called “polyandry” sealings – no sex in any of these – were done with the documented knowledge and consent of husbands. Miranda Hyde is the only possible exception, and the fact she was sealed to Orson, not Joseph, after her death suggests there was no sealing. Also no sex, regardless if it’s true or not.

A union with Apostle Orson Hyde’s wife while he was on a mission (Marinda Hyde).

Again, possibly not true. See above.

A union with a newlywed and pregnant woman (Zina Huntington).

From an interview with Zina Huntington in 1898:

Q. “Then it is a fact, Mrs. [Zina] Young, is it not, that you married Mr. Smith at the same time you were married to Mr. [Henry] Jacobs?”

A. “What right have you to ask such questions? I was sealed to Joseph Smith for eternity.”

Q. “Mrs. Young, you claim, I believe, that you were not married to him for time?”

A. “For eternity. I was married to Mr. Jacobs, but the marriage was unhappy and we parted.”

Married for time and not eternity means sealing, not marriage. Notice Zina corrects the questioner who claims she was married by saying she was *sealed* to Joseph and *married* to Mr. Jacobs. Not polyandry, and no sex.

Promises of salvation and exaltation for the girls’ entire families.

Yes.

Threats that Joseph would be slain by an angel with a drawn sword if they did not enter into the union (Zina Huntington, Almera Woodard Johnson, Mary Lightner).

No. Joseph told claimed an angel with a drawn sword would slay him if he did not accept the principle of plural marriage in general. He never claimed he would be slain if Zina, Almera, or Mary did not marry him, nor did any of these women say that he did.

Threats of loss of salvation if the woman didn’t agree to the union with Joseph Smith.

No. If you have evidence of such a thing, you ought to provide it.

Dishonesty in public sermons, 1835 D&C 101:4, denials by Joseph Smith denying he was a polygamist,

Richard Bushman in *Rough Stone Rolling* refers to these as “carefully worded” denials, which is the accurate way to describe them. Joseph’s most vigorous denials were directed at the idea that he was an adulterer, which he insisted – and which he believed - he was not. He also leaned heavily on the idea that his only legal wife was Emma, which was true. I think it likely that a fraud wouldn’t have carefully worded anything and lied with impunity – the John C. Bennett and/or Donald Trump model – and taken no pains to craft evasive answers that were technically true but still misleading.

Understand, however, that I agree with you here to an extent. I don’t think there’s any question that Joseph was not fully honest in these statements. He justified it to himself by the belief that he was

protecting himself, his family, and others engaged in plural marriage from physical harm. I like to think he took the “Abraham-said-his-wife-was-his-sister” approach. Even since the beginning, when Adam had to choose between not eating the fruit and having children, human prophets have been forced, like all of us, to make difficult choices between two bad options.

Joseph’s destruction of the Nauvoo Expositor that exposed his polygamy and which printing press destruction started the chain of events that led to Joseph’s death.

Yes. I remember listening to Truman Madsen’s hagiographic Joseph Smith tapes on my mission, where he describes this event in almost your exact words. Elder Ben B. Banks, former member of the presidency of the Seventy, [told an audience at BYU Idaho](#) that “both friends and enemies of the Prophet now agree that the act, legal or not, was unwise and inflammatory and was the major immediate factor that culminated in the Prophet’s death.”

Elder Banks was my first mission president and a beloved mentor. He performed my wedding in the Salt Lake Temple. A more kind, faithful – and orthodox - Latter-day Saint has never lived. If Ben Banks agrees with you here, I don’t think there’s anyone who would dispute this.

Marriages to young girls living in Joseph’s home as foster daughters (Lawrence sisters, Partridge sisters, Fanny Alger, Lucy Walker).

We’re back to the idea of “foster children” again, despite this not being a thing in America prior to 1853. None of these women would have referred to themselves as such. Fanny was a housekeeper, as were the Lawrence sisters. All of them were of marriageable age. You’re putting a modern label on them that they wouldn’t have recognized.

Joseph’s marriage to Fanny Alger was described by Oliver Cowdery as a “dirty, nasty, filthy affair” – Rough Stone Rolling, p.323

He did. (Actually, he said “scrape” instead of “affair,” but that’s as much a quibble as saying Joseph said “light” instead of “fire” in describing the First Vision.) Although, as Rough Stone Rolling makes clear on the same page, Joseph made no effort to deny the relationship, but only to deny that the relationship was adultery.

Oliver’s life has always fascinated me. He was the first person baptized in this dispensation; he was indispensable in the translation of the Book of Mormon; he was one of the Three Witnesses; he saw John the Baptist and Peter, James, and John; he was side-by-side with Joseph when the Savior Himself appeared at the Kirtland Temple dedication. If all these miraculous experiences were nothing but frauds, Oliver could have profited tremendously by bringing down Joseph Smith’s house of cards. Yet even when his anger at Joseph drove him out of the Church, he never denied any of this, and he came back to the Church late in his life, after Joseph was dead and despite having no position of prominence or authority. Apparently, Oliver was ultimately able to accept that Joseph Smith’s character was not so soiled by plural marriage as to invalidate his prophetic role.

Joseph was practicing polygamy before the sealing authority was given. LDS historian, Richard Bushman, states: “There is evidence that Joseph was a polygamist by 1835” – Rough Stone Rolling, p. 323. Plural marriages are rooted in the notion of “sealing” for both time and eternity. The “sealing”

power was not restored until [April 3, 1836 when Elijah appeared to Joseph in the Kirtland Temple](#) and conferred the sealing keys upon him. So, Joseph's marriage to Fanny Alger in 1833 was illegal under both the laws of the land and under any theory of divine authority; it was adultery.

The best evidence suggests that Joseph received the revelation now recorded in Section 132 sometime in 1831 when he was engaged in his translation of the Bible. Such a revelation would have given him the authority to perform a plural marriage for time only, but not for eternity until the sealing power was restored. So in the case of Fanny Alger, we have a case of a marriage – including sex – that was not a sealing. There were several other cases where this happened even after the sealing keys were restored. In addition, we don't have a firm date on when the marriage took place, and some scholars place it after the Kirtland Temple dedication.

[D&C 132:63](#) very clearly states that the only purpose of polygamy is to “multiply and replenish the earth” and “bear the souls of men.”

We've just been over this, and you got it wrong then, too. These are two very different things. See above.

Why did Joseph marry women who were already married?

He didn't. He was sealed to women who were already married, but not married to them. See above.

These women were obviously not virgins, which violated D&C 132:61.

No violation. They were pure in the eyes of God. See above.

Zina Huntington had been married seven and a half months and was about six months pregnant with her first husband's baby at the time she married Joseph; clearly she didn't need any more help to “bear the souls of men.”

Say it with me now: sealing, not marriage, no sex. See above.

Also, verse 63 states that if the new wives are with another man after the polygamous marriage, they will be destroyed. Eleven of Joseph's wives lived with their first husbands after marrying Joseph Smith. Most of them lived on to old age. Why weren't they “destroyed”?

The answer to your question, in a manner of speaking, can be found by taking a detour into the first verse of the Book of Mormon. Unlike the first verse of the First Book of Napoleon, it starts out something like this:

“I, Nephi, having been born of goodly parents...”

This has been the subject of countless sermons about how goodly it is to have goodly parents. It is virtually canonized in songs our young'uns sing every Sunday.

“We have been born, as Nephi of old, to goodly parents who love the Lord...”

Mormons have all bought the idea that “goodly,” therefore, is synonymous with “good.” But if “goodly” means “good,” then why not use the word “good?” Nephi, the guy who calls his parents “goodly,” says it was a “good thing” that the children of Israel were brought out of bondage. (1 Nephi 17:25) After he built his ship, he tells us that “my brethren beheld that it was good.” According to LDS.org, the word “Good” appears 205 times in the Book of Mormon, and it always means what you think it would mean. The word “goodly,” however, never appears in the Book of Mormon again after that first verse.

Of course, you could argue that Nephi never used the words “good” or “goodly,” because the Book of Mormon is a translated document. But if you did that, you’d be playing right into my evilly hands, because “goodly” would therefore be reflective of the translator’s vocabulary, not the author’s. And what did the word “goodly” mean to Joseph Smith in 19th Century America?

The clue is in the next word after the clause in question.

“I, Nephi, having been born of goodly parents, therefore...”

Aha! The word “therefore” establishes causality. The goodness of Nephi’s parents led to some result, which is revealed in the subsequent clause.

“I, Nephi, having been born of goodly parents, therefore I was taught somewhat in all the learning of my father;”

Nephi’s parents’ goodness allowed for Nephi to receive a stellar education. How does one receive a stellar education? One pays through the nose for it using one’s goods. “Goodly,” in the 19th Century, meant “laden with goods,” or “wealthy.” But that screws everything up.

“We have been born, as Nephi of old, to wealthy parents who love the Lord...”

I’m sorry, but it just doesn’t have the same ringly to it.

So, to your point, “destroyed” is a goodly example of this principle. The 1830s Webster Dictionary defines “destroyed” as “to cause to cease; to put an end to.” Marital relationships that are not bound by the sealing power will ultimately be destroyed – i.e. ended. That’s goodly enough for me.

How about the consent of the first wife, which receives so much attention in D&C 132? Emma was unaware of most of Joseph’s plural marriages, at least until after the fact, which violated D&C 132.

Can you provide me a number of marriages of which Emma was aware? No, because you don’t know, and neither do I, and neither does anyone else. We know there are some marriages where she was aware and consenting. And D&C 132, as you noted earlier, makes a provision that the man is not subject to the “law of Sarah,” i.e. the consent of the first wife, if the first wife rejects the principle altogether. This put Joseph in the position of having to choose Emma or the Lord, and I doubt either you or I would have fared better in walking that line if placed in a similar predicament.

I’ve been asked once by an LDS apologist if I would be okay with Joseph Smith’s polygamy and polyandry if I received a witness that God really did command Joseph Smith to participate in these

practices. The question is not if I would “be okay with” God commanding Joseph Smith to secretly steal other men’s wives and to marry underage and teenage girls.

You’re right; that isn’t the question, because Joseph Smith didn’t steal other men’s wives or marry underage girls. One more time: sealing, not marriage, no sex.

The question is “Do I believe that God did such a thing?” The answer, based on comparing D&C 132 to what actually happened, along with my personal belief that there is no such thing as an insane polygamist god who demanded such sadistic, immoral, adulterous, despicable, and pedophilic behavior while threatening Joseph’s life with one of his angels with a sword...is an emphatic and absolute “no.”

That’s my answer, too. The difference is that I don’t think God did anything close to what you’re describing. No sadism, no immorality, no adultery, strange but not despicable, and absolutely no pedophilia. Also, in most cases, sealing, not marriage, no sex.

The secrecy of the marriages and the private and public denials by Joseph Smith are not congruent with honest behavior.

You and Immanuel Kant have a lot in common.

Kant was the philosopher who insisted that honesty was a “categorical imperative,” and that it was never appropriate to tell a lie under any circumstances. The famous example to illustrate this comes from the story of “Kant’s Axe,” where Kant posits that if an axe-wielding murderer shows up on your doorstep and asks where your best friend is so he can go kill him, the “categorical imperative” of honesty required you to answer him truthfully, even if it were likely to result in your friend’s grisly death.

From my perspective, an honest answer in that situation would be entirely immoral. Yes, honesty is important. But my friend is more important. In that situation, he represents a higher value – love trumping honesty.

There are plenty of other situations, most far less dramatic, where I feel another value can trump honesty. What did you think of my talk, Bishop? Well, Sister Jones, you had nothing interesting to say, and I had a hard time paying attention to you because I couldn’t take my eyes off of that honker you call a nose. Dad, did you enjoy my piano recital? Why, no, son, I thought it was deathly boring, and you may have been the worst one up there. Honey, does this dress make me look fat? Oh my, yes. You look like a whale in that thing!

In those examples, I believe kindness is far more important than honesty. Values are often competing priorities, and they can’t all be satisfied in every case.

The choices in mortality are seldom choices between good and evil. (Should I go to Church this Sunday or rob a bank instead? Maybe I’ll flip a coin.) They’re usually choices between less good and more good. Joseph firmly believed, and not without good reason, that the lives of many good people were in danger if he were to be fully forthright about polygamy. In hindsight, as you read his “carefully worded” denials, you can see the struggle and his attempt to be as honest as he felt was safe. You may have chosen differently in that case, but surely you wouldn’t tell an axe murderer where your best

friend was.

Emma was unaware of most of these marriages.

Objection, your honor. Speculative. Also asked and answered.

She certainly did not consent to most of them as required by D&C 132.

Law of Sarah was waived. See above.

The Saints did not know what was going on behind the scenes as polygamy did not become common knowledge until 1852 when Brigham Young revealed it in Utah.

Given that roughly 25% of the Church was practicing plural marriage as they crossed the plains, this is almost certainly untrue. The 1852 declaration of plural marriage was an announcement to the world, not a statement to the Church, which was living with the doctrine firsthand.

Joseph Smith did everything he could to keep the practice in the dark.

Actually, there are several incidences where Joseph tried to teach the principle and was disheartened by the Saints' unwillingness to accept it.

In fact, Joseph's desire to keep this part of his life a secret is what ultimately contributed to his death when he ordered the destruction of the printing press ([Nauvoo Expositor](#)) that dared expose his behavior in June 1844. This event initiated a chain of events that led to Carthage.

Nobody denies this.

Consider the following denial made by Joseph Smith to Latter-day Saints in Nauvoo in May 1844 – a month before his death:

"...What a thing it is for a man to be accused of committing adultery, and having seven wives, when I can only find one. I am the same man, and as innocent as I was fourteen years ago; and I can prove them all perjurers." – [History of the Church, Vol. 6, Chapter 19, p. 411](#)

Again, look at the actual text. As Bushman pointed out above, it's "carefully worded." Joseph full statement here is vigorously denying adultery, of which Joseph believed he was not guilty, as he was married to the women with whom he was having sexual relations. The seven wives reference in the thing is the only direct reference to polygamy, and Joseph is leaning on the idea that Emma is his only legal wife, which, too, was true. Misleading? Yes. But nearly as brazenly dishonest as you're suggesting.

It is a matter of historical fact that Joseph had secretly taken over 30 plural wives by May 1844 when he made the above denial that he was ever a polygamist.

He's denying he's an adulterer, not a polygamist, and most of the wives were sealings, not marriages, no sex.

If you go to Familysearch.org – an LDS-owned genealogy website – you can clearly see that Joseph Smith had many wives. The Church’s new October 2014 [Plural Marriage in Kirtland and Nauvoo](#) essay acknowledges that Joseph Smith was a polygamist.

Those facts have been openly acknowledged by the Church for over 150 years.

The facts speak for themselves – from 100% LDS sources – that Joseph Smith was dishonest.

See above. Joseph tried to walk the line between honesty and keeping himself and his family safe, and, like all human beings trying to satisfy conflicting values, he wasn’t always able to do.

The following 1835 edition of Doctrine & Covenants revelations bans polygamy:

[1835 Doctrine & Covenants 101:4](#): “Inasmuch as this Church of Christ has been reproached with the crime of fornication, and polygamy: we declare that we believe, that one man should have one wife; and one woman, but one husband, except in case of death, when either is at liberty to marry again.”

There’s that careful wording again. Notice the use of the word “but” in reference to women, but not to men. Women are therefore explicitly prohibited from having more than one husband, while men “should have one wife,” without the explicit prohibition of having more than one. Also keep in mind that plural marriage, at least in the minds of the Saints, was not “polygamy” as understood by 19th Century folk – i.e. harems and concubines and seraglios. Even after plural marriage became public, the Utah saints went out of their way to distance themselves from those kinds of practices. This revelation is trying to put some distance between those two versions of polygyny, which, in practice, really were quite different from each other.

[1835 Doctrine & Covenants 13:7](#):

“Thou shalt love thy wife with all thy heart, and shall cleave unto her and none else.”

And? A polygamist would be in full agreement with this. A man cleaving unto a woman who is not his wife is adultery.

[1835 Doctrine & Covenants 65:3](#):

“Wherefore, it is lawful that he should have one wife, and they twain shall be one flesh, and all this that the earth might answer the end of its creation.”

Yes. Notably, this uses the language of Genesis, which somehow did not stop many of the ancient patriarchs from practicing polygamy. It states the lawfulness of having one wife but makes no statement on the lawfulness of having more than one.

Joseph Smith was already a polygamist when these revelations were introduced into the [1835 edition of the Doctrine & Covenants](#) and Joseph publicly taught that the doctrine of the Church was monogamy. Joseph continued secretly marrying multiple women as these revelations/scriptsures remained in force.

The doctrine of the Church was monogamy. The Book of Mormon makes it clear that monogamy is the standard, and polygamy is the occasional exception. Joseph's teaching on this subject was therefore correct, as anyone entering into plural marriage without priesthood authorization to do so would be guilty of adultery.

In an attempt to influence and abate public rumors of his secret polygamy, Joseph got 31 witnesses to sign an affidavit published in the LDS [October 1, 1842 Times and Seasons](#) stating that Joseph did not practice polygamy. Pointing to the above-mentioned D&C 101:4 scripture, these witnesses claimed the following:

“...we know of no other rule or system of marriage than the one published in the Book of Doctrine and Covenants.”

Nope. Quote the rest of it, please.

*We the undersigned members of the church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints and residents of the city of Nauvoo, persons of families do hereby certify and declare that we know of no other rule or system of marriage than the one published from the Book of Doctrine and Covenants, **and we give this certificate to show that Dr. J. C. Bennett's "secret wife system" is a creature of his own make as we know of no such society in this place not never did.*** [Emphasis added]

This was not, in fact, an affidavit “stating that Joseph did not practice polygamy.” It is an affidavit disavowing “Dr. J.C. Bennett's ‘secret wife system,’ i.e. the “spiritual wifeism” I described earlier, which was a flimsy pretext for adultery and antithetical to the principle of plural marriage as practiced by Joseph.

The problem with this affidavit is that it was signed by several people who were secret polygamists or who knew that Joseph was a polygamist at the time they signed the affidavit. In fact, [Eliza R. Snow](#), one of the signers of this affidavit, was Joseph Smith's plural wife.

She was also, if some sources to be believed, on the receiving end of John C. Bennett's predatory “spiritual wife” advances. She would have every legitimate reason to come out in full force of Dr. Bennett's gross distortion of the principle of plural marriage.

In addition, the fact that 31 witnesses could make this statement with a clear conscience undermines your implication that they saw a conflict between the predatory seduction they were denouncing and the principle of plural marriage they were practicing.

Joseph and Eliza were married 3 months earlier on June 29, 1842. Two Apostles and future prophets, John Taylor and Wilford Woodruff, were very aware of Joseph's polygamy behind the scenes when they signed. Another signer, Bishop Whitney, had personally married his daughter [Sarah Ann](#)

Whitney to Joseph as a plural wife a few months earlier on July 27, 1842; Whitney's wife and Sarah's mother Elizabeth (also a signer) witnessed the ceremony.

So if this was such a blatant lie, why did no one object? Are we to assume that all of these people were as blithely dishonest as you suggest Joseph Smith was? The far more plausible explanation the idea that this affidavit was denouncing a practice that they believed was wholly inconsistent with the doctrine they were then living.

What does it say about Joseph Smith and his character to include his plural wife and buddies – who knew about his secret polygamy/polyandry – to lie and perjure in a sworn public affidavit that Joseph was not a polygamist?

It says that you have unwittingly misinterpreted this affidavit as perjury when it was not.

Now, does the fact that Joseph Smith practiced polygamy and polyandry while lying to Emma, the Saints, and the world about it over the course of 10+ years prove that he was a false prophet? That the Church is false? No, it doesn't.

Well, that's mighty big of you, but it's also a distortion of reality. Joseph practiced no polyandry – sealings, no marriage, no sex. You really have no idea what he told Emma. No question he was less than fully honest in discussing the practice with the world, but the fact that he still attempted to reconcile honesty with concern for the safety of the Saints speaks well of him.

Also, 10+ years is really stretching it. He was first married to a plural wife in late 1835/early 1836, and he was dead by 1844, so nine years is the best you can do. Given that almost all of Joseph's practice of the doctrine took place in the two-and-a-half years of his life, that's an unsustainable accusation.

What it does prove, however, is that Joseph Smith's pattern of behavior or *modus operandi* for a period of at least 10 years of his adult life was to keep secrets, be deceptive, and be dishonest – both privately and publicly.

Is a bishop or stake president who refuses to discuss the private confession of an adulterer in public acting being secretive, deceptive, and dishonest? If you ask a bishop directly if Brother So-and-So had an affair, would he be wrong to try and find some way to deflect the question to protect the sanctity of the confidentiality to which he is bound? Should we applaud a bishop who blabs about such private matters because that bishop is being honest?

This is a line I have had to walk in my own family. Having been involved as a bishopric member in administering disciplinary councils, I learned things about my fellow ward members about which I cannot speak or even hint to own wife. When such things come up in passing, I try not to be dishonest, but I definitely do everything I can to skirt the subject. Does this make me a liar? By your definition, yes. From my perspective, I'm trying to balance the value of honesty with the value of protecting those who trust me to keep things confidential.

Just as I do not deny that polygamy is strange and even troubling, I think it is impossible for any

remotely objective observer to deny that Joseph believed it to be the will of God, and that he practiced plural marriage as a religious principle, not as a vehicle for sexual predation. As such, he felt duty bound to keep such matters confidential in the same spirit that church leaders today do not publicize the confessional discussions they have with church members.

It's when you take this snapshot of Joseph's character and start looking into the Book of Abraham, the Kinderhook Plates, the Book of Mormon, the multiple First Vision accounts, Priesthood restoration, and so on that you start to see a very disturbing pattern and picture.

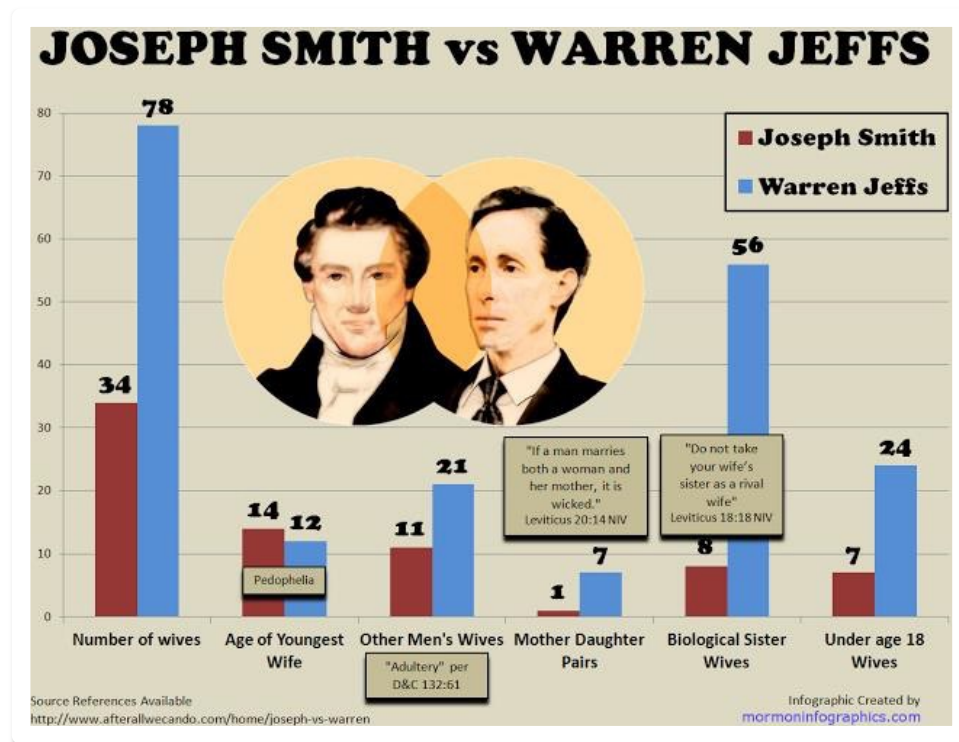
When you apply a single lens colored with a blanket assumption of dishonesty, then of course every pattern is disturbing. You're like the citizens of the Emerald City who wear green glasses so that everything looks green. (That doesn't happen in the movie, but it's in the book.)

You've been unable to objectively demonstrate no dishonesty in the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, the Book of Abraham, or the multiple – and consistent – First Vision accounts. All you've been able to do is show your own assumption of dishonesty in instances that are often based on your own misunderstandings and not the facts.

Do you really think this approach is exclusive to Joseph Smith?

If you assume from the outset that Martin Luther King or Gandhi were fundamentally dishonest (they both had extramarital affairs about which they lied), or that George Washington was inherently wicked (he owned other human beings), or that Barack Obama is a bloodthirsty killer (he ordered the murder of Osama bin Laden), then every perception of these largely decent and upstanding men is tainted, and they can do nothing right.

What's truly disturbing to me is that every time it's possible to give Joseph the benefit of the doubt, you choose not to grant it to him. In fact, you choose to interpret all of his actions in as harsh a light as possible. I think it would be wise to readjust your snapshot.

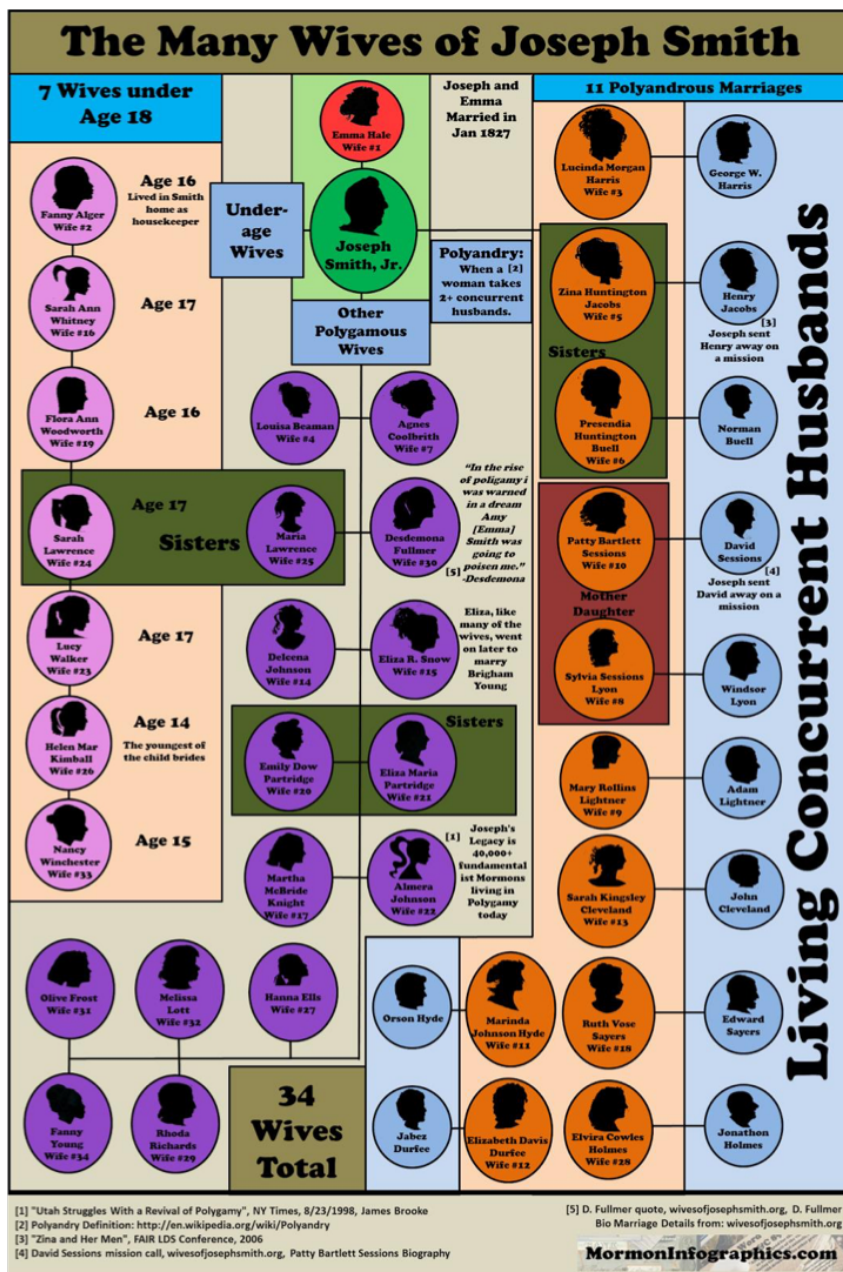


Warren Jeffs is more closely aligned to Joseph Smith Mormonism than the LDS Church is.

Sorry to be crude, but this is like saying rape and marital intimacy are essentially the same thing.

How many of Warren Jeffs' relationships were sealings, not marriages, with no sex? As repeatedly mentioned above, Joseph had no sexual relations with underage girls and was therefore no pedophile, and he had sealings/no marriage/no sex with any other men's wives and was not an adulterer. The only new accusation in here is that Joseph, by marrying women who were related to each other, was in violation of the Law of Moses, a law fulfilled by the coming of Christ that we are no longer commanded to live. I'm not sure, but I'm willing to bet Joseph ate shellfish on occasion, too, which, under the Mosaic law, constitutes "an abomination." ([Leviticus 11:12.](#)) One more thing you can use to pile on, Jeremy.

But enough of my yakkin'. What do the unreliable and inflammatory folks at Mormoninfographics.com have to say?



Again, we're just retreading all the same ground here – so many of these are not sexual relationships and not even marriages, and simply repeating the same accusations graphically is kind of tedious, albeit a bit more colorful. Saying the same thing over and over doesn't make it more true.

Interesting, however, that the graphic identifies Fanny Alger as a "housekeeper" and not a "foster daughter," which is how you erroneously described here earlier. I do concede, however, that the (irrelevant) dream about Emma Smith poisoning Desdemona Fullmer is a nice touch if your goal is to think as poorly of Joseph Smith as is possible, which seems to be the purpose here. Context suggests that the recounting of the dream, which Fullmer recounted in 1868 when the RLDS folks were deeply suspicious of Emma, was more of an attempt to smear the RLDS folks than indict Joseph. Perhaps we should forgive her for such a slight, as Fullmer remained faithful throughout her life.

Prophets Concerns & Questions:

1. Adam-God: President Brigham Young taught what is now known as "Adam-God theory." He taught that Adam is "our Father and our God, and the only God with whom we have to do." Young not only taught this doctrine over the pulpit at the [1852](#) and [1854](#) General Conferences but he also introduced this doctrine as the [Lecture at the Veil](#) in the endowment ceremony of the Temple.

Yeah, Adam-God is wacky. It makes no sense, even in context. I can't find any evidence that it penetrated the culture of the Church, which leaves open the possibility that the early saints understood Brigham in a way that eludes modern interpretation. (That's the case with Blood Atonement, which we'll get to later.) There doesn't seem to be any attempt by church members to apply Adam-God in practice, which, if this were binding doctrine, would likely have had a greater impact than a handful of confusing sermons. Fundamentalist splinter groups now teach this, but they didn't start doing so until long after Brigham was dead.

Robert Millet – a BYU prof, so perhaps he and Nibley are at least semi-official apologists? – had the best take on this in his book *Are Mormons Christians?*, the relevant excerpt of which [can be found online](#). His opinion is reflective of my own on this subject. His remarks are in brown, the color of a semi-official bagel.

Yet another way in which anti-Mormon critics often misrepresent LDS doctrine is in the presentation of anomalies as though they were the doctrine of the Church. Anomalies occur in every field of human endeavor, even in science. An anomaly is something unexpected that cannot be explained by the existing laws or theories, but which does not constitute evidence for changing the laws and theories. An anomaly is a glitch.

For example, if a chemist combines two parts hydrogen and one part oxygen a hundred times in a row, and ninety-nine times she gets water but on the hundredth time she gets alcohol, this does not mean that one percent of the time the laws of chemistry are different. It simply means that something was wrong with the hundredth experiment, even though the experimenter may not know what it was. Beakers may have been mislabelled; grad students may have been playing a practical joke; instruments might have given incorrect readings; secretaries might have typed the wrong information. If the anomaly could be reproduced experimentally, then it would be significant and would demand a change in the theories. But if it can't be reproduced, it is simply ignored--as an anomaly. It is assumed that some unknown factor was different in the case of the anomalous results, and the experiment yielding those results is therefore invalid. Moreover, to ignore such anomalies is not considered dishonesty, but represents sound scientific method...

A classic example of an anomaly in the LDS tradition is the so-called "Adam-God theory." During the latter half of the nineteenth century Brigham Young made some remarks about the relationship between Adam and God that the Latter-day Saints have never been able to understand. The reported statements conflict with LDS teachings before and after Brigham Young, as well as with statements of President Young himself during the same period of time. So how do Latter-day Saints deal with the phenomenon? We don't; we simply set it aside. It is an anomaly. On occasion my colleagues and I at Brigham Young University have tried to figure out what Brigham Young might have actually said and what it might have meant, but the attempts have always failed. The reported statements simply do not compute --we cannot make sense out of them. This is not a matter of believing it or disbelieving it; we simply don't

know what "it" is. If Brigham Young were here we could ask him what he actually said and what he meant by it, but he is not here, and even expert students of his thought are left to wonder whether he was misquoted, whether he meant to say one thing and actually said another, whether he was somehow joking with or testing the Saints, or whether some vital element that would make sense out of the reports has been omitted.

For the Latter-day Saints, however, the point is moot, since whatever Brigham Young said, true or false, was never presented to the Church for a sustaining vote. It was not then and is not now a doctrine of the Church, and--like the chemist who can neither explain nor reproduce her results--the Church has merely set the phenomenon aside as an anomaly.

Prophets and apostles after Young renounced Adam-God theory as false doctrine.

That's probably because it *is* a false doctrine, at least as it's understood by modern sensibilities.

President Spencer W. Kimball renounced Adam-God theory in the October 1976 Conference:

"We warn you against the dissemination of doctrines which are not according to the scriptures and which are alleged to have been taught by some of the General Authorities of past generations. Such, for instance, is the Adam-God theory. We denounce that theory and hope that everyone will be cautioned against this and other kinds of false doctrine." – President Spencer W. Kimball, [Our Own Liahona](#)

And amen to President Kimball for that.

Along with President Spencer W. Kimball and similar statements from others, Bruce R. McConkie made the following statement:

"The devil keeps this heresy alive as a means of obtaining converts to cultism. It is contrary to the whole plan of salvation set forth in the scriptures, and anyone who has read the Book of Moses, and anyone who has received the temple endowment, has no excuse whatever for being led astray by it. Those who are so ensnared reject the living prophet and close their ears to the apostles of their day." – Bruce R. McConkie, [The Seven Deadly Heresies](#)

Yeah, not a fan of The Seven Deadly Heresies, but that's another discussion altogether. Your point, however, is that prophets and apostles after Brigham have vigorously disavowed Adam-God as false doctrine, and you are entirely correct, just as they were correct to disavow it.

Ironically, McConkie's June 1980 condemnation asks you to trust him and Kimball as today's living prophet.

I don't see how that's ironic at all. Wasn't President Kimball the living prophet in 1980?

Further, McConkie is pointing to the endowment ceremony as a source of factual information.

Meaning what? The fact Elder McConkie is citing is that the endowment ceremony makes it very clear that Adam is the archangel Michael, not God the Father. Given that Brigham Young wrote the endowment ceremony when they got to Salt Lake based on his memory of Nauvoo, Brigham clearly knew that Adam was Michael, not Heavenly Father, which make these anomalous forays into Adam God-ism more confusing.

What about the Saints of Brigham's day who were following their living prophet?

What about them? The records of the day suggest that they saw no need to incorporate Adam-God into Mormon theology, so they obviously understood Brigham's point in a way that we don't.

And what about the endowment ceremony of their day where Adam-God was being taught at the veil?

What about it? We don't have anything but a second-hand recounting of notes from his secretary. Again, if this was received as the kind of earth-shattering departure from what the Church currently teaches, it would be something that we'd have to reckon with. As it is, everything Brigham had to say on the subject was greeted with a collective shrug from the Church at large, so there seems to be an element of this that we no longer understand.

Yesterday's doctrine is today's false doctrine and yesterday's prophet is today's heretic.

You say this as if it were a bad thing. Isn't that the reason we have living prophets in the first place?

I don't think you've thought through the implications of your assumption here. For no prophet to ever say something that isn't later shown to be wrong by revelation, then you have to believe that the entirety of information on every subject would have to be given to them from heaven. At what point did you assume that took place? Did Joseph get it all before he died? Even if he did – which he didn't – up until the point where the download was complete, doesn't that make him yesterday's heretic for most of his life?

Consider that this can be true not just from prophet to prophet, but even within any given prophet's tenure as a prophet. Latter-day Saints, including Joseph and Oliver, believed in a traditional Christian heaven and hell when the Church was organized in 1830. Then in 1832, Joseph and Sidney Rigdon had the vision of the Three Degrees of Glory, and it blew the traditional Christian theology to smithereens. So Joseph himself believed yesterday's false doctrine and was yesterday's heretic. Of course, no one is under condemnation for being mistaken in the absence of revelation, as we're all judged on the level of light and knowledge we receive.

Latter-Day Saint theology is diametrically opposed to that kind of thinking. It means the Lord teaches his people the way he always has – “line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little.” (2 Nephi 28:30) If that's the process, then surely it means that the Church is going

to move away from positions of error when it receives greater light.

If your assumption were correct, that would also negate the Ninth Article of Faith, which states that “We believe all that God has revealed, all that He does now reveal, and *we believe that He will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God.*” [Emphasis added]

If he’s going to reveal many great and important things tomorrow, won’t that make all of us yesterday’s heretics? The fact is that this has always been the Lord’s method throughout all generations of time. It has always been the case that people who reject living prophets almost always do so by professing fealty to dead ones. Those who rejected Christ did so in the name of Abraham, just as those who most vigorously fight against Joseph Smith do so in the name of Christ.

Blood Atonement: Along with Adam-God, Young taught a doctrine known as "Blood Atonement" where a person's blood had to be shed to atone for their own sins as it was beyond the atonement of Jesus Christ.

“There are sins that men commit for which they cannot receive forgiveness in this world, or in that which is to come, and if they had their eyes open to see their true condition, they would be perfectly willing to have their blood spilt upon the ground, that the smoke thereof might ascend to heaven as an offering for their sins; and the smoking incense would atone for their sins, whereas, if such is not the case, they will stick to them and remain upon them in the spirit world.

I know, when you hear my brethren telling about cutting people off from the earth, that you consider it is strong doctrine; but it is to save them, not to destroy them...

And furthermore, I know that there are transgressors, who, if they knew themselves, and the only condition upon which they can obtain forgiveness, would beg of their brethren to shed their blood, that the smoke thereof might ascend to God as an offering to appease the wrath that is kindled against them, and that the law might have its course. I will say further;

I have had men come to me and offer their lives to atone for their sins.

It is true that the blood of the Son of God was shed for sins through the fall and those committed by men, yet men can commit sins which it can never remit... There are sins that can be atoned for by an offering upon an altar, as in ancient days; and there are sins that the blood of a lamb, or a calf, or of turtle dove, cannot remit, but they must be atoned for by the blood of the man.”

– [Journal of Discourses, Vol. 4, p. 53-54](#)

Ah, Brigham, you silver-tongued smooth talker, you. You say the sweetest things.

Basically, we're looking at a big heaping mess of 19th Century rhetorical excess right here. This was part and parcel with the Mormon "reformation," where Brigham felt it necessary to scare the hell out of everyone in order to get them to recommit to living the gospel. People were rebaptized, and Brigham was essentially playing the part of Billy Graham, laying it on as thick as he possibly could – and, clearly, going to far on this particular occasion.

How do we know this was heated rhetoric that wasn't taken very seriously? Because while we have this intemperate sermon, we don't actually have any documented *practice* of blood atonement. (The Church, in the footnotes to their essay on 19th Century violence, says that there was "at least one instance" where someone took action based on this, but I don't know what that would be.) Brigham knew his audience, and he knew they would understand how much of this was just bluster. The problem would be if people actually started killing themselves or other people, but that's not what happened.

There is, however, scriptural precedent for this kind of spiritual "scared-straight" approach.

Check out D&C 19, where God states that endless punishment isn't really endless, and eternal punishment isn't really eternal. The Lord acknowledges that describing punishment this way is "more express than other scriptures, that it might work upon the hearts of the children of men, altogether for my name's glory."

In other words, God is literally trying to scare the hell out of people. Brigham is taking that approach here, I think, and, in my estimation, not doing a very good job at it.

We keep circling back to the idea of prophetic infallibility – you believed in it, and you were crushed when it turned out not to be true. But it isn't true, and that's a good thing. An infallible prophet no longer has agency, and the one thing the Lord will never do is mess with agency, even for the guys in the First Presidency.

I think we do a huge disservice to our youth with the hero worship of church leaders. So many of the problems you raise stop being problems when you can simply acknowledge that these good men occasionally made mistakes.

The Church now confirms in its [May 2014 essay](#) that Blood Atonement was taught by the prophet Brigham Young.

No, not really. The essay alludes to to sermon you cite in the main body, but the only direct reference to Blood Atonement comes in Footnote #36, which reads as follows:

See, for example, Brigham Young, in Journal of Discourses, 4:53–54; and Heber C. Kimball, in Journal of Discourses, 7:16–21. This concept, which came to be known as blood atonement, was a stock component of anti-Mormon rhetoric in the 19th century. While many of the exaggerated claims that appeared in the popular press and anti-Mormon literature are easily disproven, it is likely that in at least one instance, a few Latter-day Saints acted on this rhetoric. Nevertheless, most Latter-day Saints seem to have recognized that the blood atonement sermons were, in the words of historian Paul Peterson, “hyperbole or incendiary talk” that were “likely designed to frighten church members into conforming with Latter-day Saint principles. To Saints with good intentions, they were

calculated to cause alarm, introspection, and ultimately repentance. For those who refused to comply with Mormon standards, it was hoped such ominous threats would hasten their departure from the Territory.” (See Isaac C. Haight letter to Brigham Young, June 11, 1857, Brigham Young Office Files; Peterson, “Mormon Reformation of 1856–1857,” 67, 84n66; see also Encyclopedia of Mormonism, 5 vols. [1992], “Blood Atonement,” 1:131.) [Emphasis added.]

The Blood Atonement doctrine was later declared false by future prophets and apostles.

That’s because it was never doctrine to begin with.

Yesterday's doctrine is today's false doctrine. Yesterday’s prophet is today’s heretic.

Amen! As it always has been, as it always will be. Line upon line. Many great and important things will yet be revealed.

Polygamy: Brigham Young taught the doctrine that polygamy is required for exaltation: "The only men who become Gods, even the Sons of God, are those who enter into polygamy." – [Journal of Discourses 11:269](#)

You really need to read the rest of the sermon, where he insists that to receive eternal life “you will be polygamists **at least in your faith.**” [Emphasis added] He comes back to this idea two other times in the speech. In other words, his message was that the Saints of the time needed to accept the divine origins of the doctrine, not necessarily engage in the practice.

Several other prophets after Young, including Taylor, Woodruff, Snow, and Joseph F. Smith gave similar teachings that the New and Everlasting Covenant of plural marriage was doctrinal and essential for exaltation.

Nope. The New and Everlasting Covenant as defined in D&C is celestial marriage, which includes monogamous sealings. Even Brigham Young [admitted](#) to George Q. Cannon. that “there would be men in the Celestial Kingdom that had but one wife.”

It’s even in the scriptures. [Doctrine & Covenants 132:4](#):

“For behold, I reveal unto you a new and an everlasting covenant; and if ye abide not that covenant, then are ye damned; for no one can reject this covenant and be permitted to enter into my glory.”

The new and everlasting covenant is celestial marriage, not plural marriage.

In a September 1998 Larry King Live [interview](#) (14:37), Hinckley was asked about polygamy:

Larry King: You condemn it [polygamy]?

Hinckley: I condemn it. Yes, as a practice, because I think it is not doctrinal.

President Hinckley was correct. The doctrine is clear: monogamy is the standard; polygamy is the exception. Since that exception is not now authorized, it is not doctrinal to violate the monogamous standard.

We still have Doctrine & Covenants 132 canonized.

And a good thing, too. So much of the modern church's most precious theology is inextricably tied to the principles in D&C 132. When primary children sing "Families Can Be Together Forever," they're referencing D&C 132. The concept of sealing families together, as well as the doctrine of theosis, trace their theological roots to the revelation on plural marriage. Rather than simply reject the whole thing out of hand, it's much better to try to understand its place in Joseph's thinking and in church history.

We're still practicing plural marriage in the Temples. Apostles Elder Oaks and Elder Nelson are modern examples of LDS polygamists in that they're sealed to multiple women.

So now you make the distinction between a marriage and a sealing? Because neither Elder Oaks nor Elder Nelson, while sealed to multiple women, have ever been married to more than one woman at a time.

Polygamy is doctrinal. Polygamy is not doctrinal.

Correct. It is doctrinal when it is authorized; when unauthorized, it is not.

Yesterday's doctrine is today's false doctrine. Yesterday's prophets are today's heretics.

Amen! As it always has been, as it always will be. Precept on precept. Living prophets always trump dead ones, which is why we need living ones.

Blacks Ban: As you know, for close to 130 years blacks were not only banned from holding the priesthood but black individuals and families were blocked from the saving ordinances of the Temple. Every single prophet from Brigham Young all the way to Harold B. Lee kept this ban in place.

Now we finally get to something I find genuinely troubling, too. Frankly, I'm not particularly enamored with the Church's record on the subject. I have spent a great deal of time defending the Church's exclusion of black members from leadership prior to 1978, and my arguments have fallen flat with others and, frankly, with me.

After the Church reversed its policy excluding black leaders a little over thirty years ago, several church leaders dusted off this scripture and made it the centerpiece of several very good sermons on the subject. I particularly like [Elder Bruce R. McConkie's sermon](#), which contained this startlingly candid admission of error.

"Forget everything that I have said, or what President Brigham Young or President George Q. Cannon or whomsoever has said in days past that is contrary to the present revelation. We spoke with a limited understanding and without the light and knowledge that now has come into the world."

– Bruce R. McConkie, "All Are Alike Unto God," August 18, 1978

Fine. So why do so many members of the Church feel it necessary to defend some of the more racist nonsense that these people were spouting prior to the 1978 revelation? Those who honestly and open-heartedly examine the life of Brigham Young will come to the conclusion that he was a mighty man called by God to lead the Church and do a great work.

But anyone who believes he was infallible is missing the boat.

Indeed, pretty much all of the racism that wormed its way into Church policy can be traced back to Brigham, who gave more credence to popular 19th century theories about the ancestry of the African people than he should have. It certainly doesn't come from Joseph Smith, who received the fundamental revelations that form the spiritual foundation for the Church as it existed then and today. That scripture quoted above from 2 Nephi, for instance, has been around for over 180 years. Joseph Smith himself ordained several black men to the priesthood. When asked about "the situation of the negro," as was the language of the time, here was Joseph Smith's reply:

"They came into the world slaves mentally and physically. Change their situation with the whites, and they would be like them. They have souls, and are subjects of salvation. Go into Cincinnati or any city, and find an educated negro, who rides in his carriage, and you will see a man who has risen by the powers of his own mind to his exalted state of respectability. The slaves in Washington are more refined than many in high places, and the black boys will take the shine of many of those they brush and wait on."

– History of the Church, Volume 5, page 216.

That's not to say that Joseph Smith was Martin Luther King, but the view expressed in the preceding paragraph is remarkably enlightened for that time period. I doubt even Abraham Lincoln, who firmly believed that blacks were inferior to whites, would have been nearly as egalitarian.

The idea that the African people descended from Cain and were a cursed race did not originate with the LDS Church. It was a popular 19th Century justification for slavery, and while Brigham Young certainly believed it, there is no scriptural justification for using that idea to exclude black members from Church leadership. Indeed, the idea was not codified as church policy until long after Brigham Young's death.

David O. McKay, president of the Church from 1950 to 1970, made this very clear when he stated:

"There is not now, and there never has been a doctrine in this church that the negroes are under a divine curse. There is no doctrine in the church of any kind pertaining to the negro. We believe that we

have a scriptural precedent for withholding the priesthood from the negro. It is a practice, not a doctrine, and the practice someday will be changed. And that's all there is to it."

David O McKay, 1954

The idea of "scriptural precedent" disturbs me somewhat. Critics of the church seize on volatile statements in the Book of Mormon that talk about a curse being placed on the Lamanites which included a "skin of darkness," but the irony is that the Lamanites are believed to be ancestors of Native Americans, not people of African descent. Indeed, Church leaders, both then and now, consider Native Americans to be part of the House of Israel and heirs to a magnificent destiny. No one has ever tried to use those inflammatory passages in the Book of Mormon to justify keeping the priesthood from Native Americans, even though these passages are far more explicit and defamatory than the cryptic verses used to link Africans to Cain.

President McKay repeatedly stated that the priesthood ban was a policy, not a doctrine, although it would take a revelation to reverse it. My question, as well as everybody else's question, is if it's just a policy, then why would it take a revelation to reverse it? And why didn't the revelation come to President McKay, who reportedly prayed very ardently to receive such?

There's no definitive answer. I believe, however, that since President McKay was, like many of his generation, a believer in segregation, he had difficulty imagining a colorblind world. It took someone willing to fully accept the idea that "all are alike unto God," and all the ramifications of that to open the door for the revelation. I don't think that someone arrived on the scene until Spencer Kimball became President of the Church in 1974.

Prophets, Seers, and Revelators of 2013 – in its December 2013 [Race and the Priesthood](#) essay – disavowed the "theories" of yesterday's Prophets, Seers, and Revelators for their theological, institutional, and doctrinal racist teachings and "revelation". Yesterday's racist doctrine and revelation is today's "disavowed theories".

Your use of the word "revelation" – quotation marks yours – is interesting. Can you show me the revelation that banned blacks from the priesthood? You can't, because none exists. The idea that lifting the ban was a renunciation of a revelation cannot be sustained by the facts. In addition, President McKay's statement that the ban was a policy, not a doctrine, further undermines your position here.

Joseph Smith permitted the priesthood to at least two black men. [Elijah Abel](#) was one of them. [Walker Lewis](#) was another.

So, Joseph Smith gives the priesthood to blacks. Brigham Young bans blacks. Each and every single one of the 10 prophets from Brigham Young to Harold B. Lee supported what Spencer W. Kimball referred to as a "possible error" (Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball, p. 448-449).

A possible error, yes, because error is possible. Prior to your faith crisis, you apparently believed that prophetic error was impossible, despite the central nature of agency to Mormon theology.

Heavenly Father likes blacks enough to give them the priesthood under Joseph Smith but He decides they're not okay when Brigham Young shows up. And He still doesn't think they're okay for the next 130 years and the next 9 prophets until President Kimball decides to get a revelation.

Heavenly Father's love for all people has been clear in the Book of Mormon since the founding of the Church. 2 Nephi 26:33 states that "[The Lord] denieth none that cometh unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female; ... all are alike unto God." The fact that the Church didn't fully live up to that principle is the fault of man, not God.

The same God who "denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female" is the same God who denied blacks from the saving ordinances of the Temple for 130 years. Yet, He changed His mind again in 1978 about black people.

Quoting from the Book of Mormon musical, are we? Of course God didn't change his mind about black people. God instead had to wait for fallible white people to reject racism.

Of course, the revelation He gives to the Brethren in the Salt Lake Temple on June 1, 1978 has absolutely nothing to do with Jimmy Carter's IRS potentially revoking the Church's and BYU's tax-exempt status, Stanford and other universities boycotting BYU athletics, we can't figure out who's black or not in Brazil, and that post-Civil Rights societal trends were against the Church's racism.

On the contrary, I'm sure the revelation had a great deal to do with all of those things. Why would that be a problem? Revelations don't come in a vacuum and never have. Remember, the Word of Wisdom was received because Emma was tired of cleaning up the tobacco stains all over the floor in the School of the Prophets. Revelations come when we ask questions, and we ask questions when there are pressing circumstances that require an answer.

Christ's true Church should have been the one leading the Civil Rights movement, not be the last major Church on the planet in 1978 to adopt it.

Indeed! That's probably why Church issued strong statements in support of the Civil Rights Movement well before the 1978 revelation. The following statement was read by a member of the First Presidency in the October 1963 General Conference:

During recent months, both in Salt Lake City and across the nation, considerable interest has been expressed in the position of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on the matter of civil rights. We would like it to be known that there is in this Church no doctrine, belief, or practice that is intended to deny the enjoyment of full civil

rights by any person regardless of race, color, or creed.

We say again, as we have said many times before, that we believe that all men are the children of the same God, and that it is a moral evil for any person or group of persons to deny any human being the right to gainful employment, to full educational opportunity, and to every privilege of citizenship, just as it is a moral evil to deny him the right to worship according to the dictates of his own conscience.

On this one, the Church beat Congress to the punch. The landmark Civil Rights Act, which codified these ideas into law, didn't pass until 1964.

As a believing member, I had no idea that Joseph Smith gave the priesthood to black men.

Then I would think discovering that Joseph gave the priesthood to black men would be extraordinarily encouraging, as that info demonstrates that the early Church was remarkably egalitarian for its time.

I'm supposed to go to the drawing board now and believe in a god who is not only a schizophrenic racist but who is inconsistent as well?

No, you're supposed to go to the drawing board and rethink your faulty premise that prophets have their agency extracted from them when they become prophets.

Yesterday's doctrine is today's false doctrine. Yesterday's 10 prophets are today's heretics.

Just as all of us will be tomorrow's heretics when new light and knowledge enters the world.

Mark Hofmann:



Cool! Dig the groovy haircut on the murderer guy!

In the early to mid-1980s, the Church shelled out close to \$900,000 in antiquities and cash to Mark Hofmann – a conman and soon-to-be serial killer – to purchase and suppress bizarre and embarrassing documents into the Church vaults that undermined and threatened the Church’s story of its origins. The documents were later proven to be forgeries.

That’s a wildly warped version of what really happened.

Not sure where you get the \$900,000 figure, as most of the documents were donated to the Church by members, and others were traded for other rarities like a copy of the Book of Commandments. Most of Hofmann’s forgeries were actually supportive of the Church’s story of its origins – most notably the fake Charles Anthon letter, which is the item that President Kimball is looking at in the picture you provide. The Church [lists ten documents at the LDS.org website](#) that were referenced in official Church materials, seven of which are highly supportive of the Church’s story. Hofmann was essentially “building the brand” by creating documents that would establish his credibility as a dealer.

The idea that the church was trying to “purchase and suppress” documents that were “bizarre and embarrassing” is belied by a number of facts. The forgery that could be termed “bizarre” would be the Salamander Letter, which claimed that Moroni was a lizard. But the Church didn’t purchase the Salamander Letter. There were negotiations with Hofmann to buy it, but they fell through. It was later donated to the Church, which “suppressed” the document by publishing the full text of it in the Church News not long after they secured it.

The other two documents that were embarrassing were the Joseph Smith III blessing, where Joseph Smith, Jr. supposedly selected his son as his successor, and the Josiah Stowell note, which confirmed that Joseph was a treasure seeker. Hofmann said in an interview that he was confident the Church would be eager to “buy the blessing on the spot and *bury* it,” i.e. purchase and suppress. The Church did nothing of the kind and initially turned Hofmann away. Later, after negotiations with the RLDS to buy the JS III blessing fell through, the Church entered into a new round of discussions with Hofmann and agreed to a non-cash trade to secure the fake blessing, which they then offered at no cost to the Reorganized Church. The Church immediately made the content of the letter public.

That’s a pretty lousy job of purchasing and suppressing.

Lack of discernment by the Brethren on such a grave threat to the Church.

Another assumption of prophetic infallibility. I’m convinced that over 90% of all the objections you raise in the CES Letter would vanish on the wind if you recognized how wrong it is to assume that prophets that aren’t perfect can’t really be prophets.

But all right, let’s pretend things had gone the way you assume they ought to have gone. Imagine the apostles meeting in the upper rooms of the Salt Lake Temple the day after Hofmann approached them with his first forgery. Suddenly, the room is filled with light. Moroni appears to warn them of the

fraud, maybe even quoting a scripture or two from the 1769 version of the KJV. Consequently, the Brethren cut off all negotiations with Hofmann along and deliver a mighty rebuking to him for his evil ways. Perhaps they also excommunicate him to boot.

What happens then?

Well, if I'm Hofmann, I go to the press. Hofmann appeared to be a meek, unassuming kind of guy, and he would have been able to generate tremendous media sympathy if the big, bad Brethren had been so mean to him. The same historical experts who validated the documents in the real turn of events would no doubt validate them in this fantasy world we're imagining, so suddenly the media narrative is that the Church is burying its head in the sand about its own history.

Soon, the Salt Lake Tribune is on the front door of the Church Office Building, demanding to know why they refuse to accept reality. Out comes Dallin Oaks or Gordon Hinckley to say – what? That Moroni told them it was a fraud? Suddenly the Church comes across as an ignorant bully, and Hofmann looks like the guileless innocent speaking truth to power.

This would have been a far graver threat to the integrity of the Church than the way it really happened.

Speeches by [Dallin H. Oaks](#) and [Gordon B. Hinckley](#) offering apologetic explanations for troubling documents ([Salamander Letter](#) and [Joseph Smith III Blessing](#)) that later ended up, unbeknownst to Oaks and Hinckley at the time of their apologetic talks, being proven complete fakes and forgeries.

They were far more bekownst than you imply. Elder Oaks's talk to which you link is entirely focused on treating such documents with considerable skepticism. President Hinckley's talk is a recounting of the line of authority from Joseph Smith to Spencer Kimball, with the document serving as a catalyst for the discussion rather than as the object of it. It is only directly referenced at the beginning and end of the talk.

The following is Oaks' [1985 defense](#) of the fake Salamander letter (which Oaks evidently thought was real and legitimate at the time):

“Another source of differences in the accounts of different witnesses is the different meanings that different persons attach to words. We have a vivid illustration of this in the recent media excitement about the word salamander in a letter Martin Harris is supposed to have sent to W. W. Phelps over 150 years ago. All of the scores of media stories on that subject apparently assume that the author of that letter used the word salamander in the modern sense of a ‘tailed amphibian.’

One wonders why so many writers neglected to reveal to their readers that there is another meaning of salamander, which may even have been the primary meaning in this context in the 1820s. That meaning, which is listed second in a current edition of

Webster's New World Dictionary, is 'a spirit supposed to live in fire' (2d College ed. 1982, s.v. 'salamander'). Modern and ancient literature contain many examples of this usage.

Look at the language he uses here. He cites an accurate and indisputable fact – an alternative definition of salamander as a spirit living in fire – and then posits that this “**may even have been**” what Martin Harris meant. (Yes, I know Martin Harris didn't mean this because he didn't say this; the letter is a fraud.) “May even have been” leaves open the possibility that it “may even not have been.” This is no ringing declaration from heaven. Reading the whole talk, it's very clear that Elder Oaks remains deeply skeptical of the letter, even though he doesn't denounce it outright.

All these examples you provide are simply reiterations of your initial charge – you believe a real prophet would not be able to be deceived because prophets ought to be perfect.

Joseph Fielding McConkie, my second mission president and Bruce R.'s son, wrote a book called *Answers: Straightforward Answers to Tough Gospel Questions*. One of the questions was “How can prophets be deceived, as in the case of Mark Hoffman?”

His answer is really good. I recount it here in purple, the color of Mark Hofmann's gum arabic ink.

This question is simply another way of asking why prophets aren't infallible. It is doubtful that those asking the question suppose themselves obligated to be faultless. Why, then, do they suppose other must be? We do not believe in the infallibility of missionaries, or Sunday School teachers, or even bishops or stake presidents. At what point do we suppose infallibility must begin?

In a revelation dealing with the lost one hundred and sixteen pages of the Book of Mormon the Lord told Joseph Smith: “But as you cannot always judge the righteous, or as you cannot always tell the wicked from the righteous, therefore I say unto, hold your peace until I shall see fit to make all things known unto the world concerning the matter” (D&C 10:37) [from *Answers*, p. 179]

If the Lord told Joseph that he couldn't always tell the righteous from the wicked, why should we assume that his successors could?

So, what just happened? Oaks defended and rationalized a completely fake and made up document that Mark Hofmann created while telling “Latter-day Saint readers” to be “more sophisticated in their evaluation of what they read.”

Honestly, you couldn't have put a more negative spin in this if you tried. The talk does nothing to “defend” the Salamander Letter, and it encourages skepticism. Again, you've found one more piece of evidence that the Brethren are fallible, which is a fact that is not in dispute. You're beating a dead

horse.

Dishonesty by Hinckley on his relationship with Hofmann, his meetings, and which documents that the Church had and didn't have.

This is a baseless charge for which you have no evidence.

The Church was forced to produce, albeit reluctantly, documents that it had previously denied existed after Hofmann leaked to the media that he sold the documents to the Church.

Another baseless charge. How do you know they released these "reluctantly?" Was that word in the press release? The Church made no attempt to hide any of these documents.

While these "prophets, seers, and revelators" were being duped and conned by Mark Hofmann's forgeries, the Tanners – considered some of the biggest enemies of the Church – actually came out and said that the Salamander Letter was a fake. Even when the Salamander Letter proved very useful to discrediting the Church, the Tanners had better discernment than the Brethren did. While the Tanners publicly rejected the Salamander Letter, the Church continued buying fakes from Hofmann and Elder Oaks continued telling Latter-day Saints to be more sophisticated.

Elder Oaks made that statement precisely once, and it proved to be wise counsel. Not sure why it sticks in your craw. It was accompanied by these others statements, too: "As readers **we should be skeptical about the authenticity of such documents**, especially when we are unsure where they were found or who had custody of them for 150 years. Newly found, historically important documents can be extremely valuable, so there is a powerful incentive for those who own them to advocate and support their authenticity. The recent spectacular fraud involving the so-called Hitler diaries reminds us of this and should convince us to be cautious." [Emphasis added]
This was not the full-on embrace that you're implying it is.

You remind me of my conversation with Mike Norton, the guy who sneaks into temples to shoot videos for YouTube. He brags about the fact that none of the temple workers have the discernment to recognize his intentions. From my perspective, I think it speaks well for the Brethren and the temple workers that they accept people at face value. Cynical and suspicious people are harder to con, surely, but the fact that apostles and prophets are perhaps too trusting and guileless is not the worst fault you could have.

As for the Tanners, good for them.

It should be noted that the Church never dropped their skepticism about the Hofmann documents or verified their authenticity. "No one, of course, can be certain that Martin Harris wrote the document," the First Presidency said about the Salamander Letter. "However, at this point we accept the judgment of the examiner that there is no indication that it is a forgery. This does not preclude the possibility that it may have been forged at a time when the Church had many enemies."

I'm told that prophets are just men who are only prophets when acting as such (whatever that means).

I'm not sure what it means, either, at least in the way you describe it. Are you suggesting that when they are acting as prophets, they cease to be men? Are they possessed a la Linda Blair and have their bodies taken over by the Spirit so they can no longer act on their own volition? The assumption of infallibility is so problematic that I don't understand how anyone could possibly think it compatible with the Restored Gospel.

I'm told that like all prophets, Brigham Young was a man of his time.

How could he be anything else?

For example, I was told that Brigham Young was acting as a man when he taught that Adam is our God and the only God with whom we have to deal with. Never mind that he taught it over the pulpit in not one but two General Conferences and never mind that he introduced this theology into the endowment ceremony in the Temples.

No, not never mind. Mind. Be mindful that a prophet's agency doesn't dissipate when he stands at a certain pulpit or walks into a temple and mindful that agency is antithetical to infallibility. Also be mindful that there is likely some component of Adam-God that modern audiences don't understand, as even these prophetic announcements apparently had no impact whatsoever on Mormon theology in theory or in practice as we would expect them to have.

Never mind that Brigham Young made it clear that he was speaking as a prophet :

"I have never yet preached a sermon and sent it out to the children of men, that they may not call scripture." – [Journal of Discourses 13:95](#)

The very next line of that sermon is "Let me have the privilege of correcting a sermon." If he's infallible, why would he have to correct his sermons? That's an admission that someone feigning infallibility would never make. In addition, since when do we believe in infallible scriptures? "If there be errors, they are the mistakes of men" applies to both the written and spoken word.

Also, why are you quoting this in the context of Adam-God? The sermon you're quoting here says absolutely nothing about that subject.

Why would I want my kids singing "Follow the Prophet" with such a ridiculous 183-year track record?

"Ridiculous 183-year track record?" You think Adam-God, Mark Hofmann, and other anomalous quirks constitute the entirety of the legacy of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints? The track record of the Church is one of lives blessed by service freely given to members and non-members alike. The amount of good that prophets have done vastly outweighs the human errors they have made.

What credibility do the Brethren have?

Quite a lot, actually. They've been wrong on occasion, but they've also been very, very right the vast majority of the time.

I turn again to J.F. McConkie. The question he's addressing is, "If we can't trust the judgment of the prophet in everything, how can we trust it in anything?" From pages 180 and 181 "Answers," once more in purple:

This chain of thought is used by fundamentalists who claim the Bible to be inherent and infallible. Their argument is that if the Bible is an error on the smallest thing, be it a matter of science, history, geography, or whatever, we cannot possibly trust it when it speaks of Christ or gospel principles. All manner of contortions are necessary to maintain this position. It makes of their theology a pious fraud and constantly requires its adherents to lie, as it were, for God. What if we assume that a person who made a mistake on one matter could never be trusted on another matter? Because we have all made mistakes, there would not be a soul left upon the face of the earth we could trust. The irony of the argument of infallibility as it applies to the Bible is that those who make it cannot agree among themselves about what its various passages mean. Of what value is an infallible book among people whose interpretations of it are so terribly flawed?

The idea of infallibility simply doesn't work. Are children justified in rejecting the inspired counsel of their parents if they can show them some other things their parents erred? Can we set aside the counsel of the bishop if we know something of his own shortcomings? Can we disregard the instruction of the family physician if we discover he misdiagnosed an illness on some past occasion? Perfection is not requisite for trust, nor need we be perfect to enjoy the prompting of the Spirit or to share in the wisdom of heaven. Gratefully, that is the case, for were it not, none of us would be suitable for the Lord's service.

Why would I want them following the prophet when a prophet is just a man of his time teaching his "theories" that will likely be disavowed by future Prophets, Seers, and Revelators?

You're looking at the teachings of the prophets through a fun-house mirror. It's a gross distortion to say that prophets primarily teach "theories" that are later disavowed. What percentage of Brigham Young's entirety of teachings is no longer consistent with what the church currently teaches? There's no way to definitively quantify it, but objectively speaking, it's a pretty small percentage. What's the likelihood that, say, baptism by immersion will become passé under the next church president? Are we going to abandon the Book of Mormon? Ditch the Sabbath Day? When should we expect a repudiation of the Sermon on the Mount?

By fixating on anomalous episodes in history that are inconsistent with how the church currently operates, you're overlooking the fact that, on the whole, the Church has been remarkably consistent in its doctrines and practices for nearly two centuries.

If his moral blueprint is not much better than their Sunday School teachers?

Sure! Why should his moral blueprint be any better than those of Sunday School teachers? Shouldn't Sunday School teachers be teaching good doctrine, too? Your false assumption here is that we should expect fallible Sunday School teachers, but not fallible prophets.

If, historically speaking, the doctrine he teaches today will likely be tomorrow's false doctrine?

Not likely at all, but certainly possible when new light and knowledge is revealed, as we have been promised it will be.

If Brigham Young was really a Prophet, Seer, and Revelator, would it not be unreasonable to expect that God would give him a hint that racism is not okay, sexism is not okay, blood atonement is not okay and God's name is not "Adam"?

God gave him plenty of hints. He's given you the same hints, as you both have direct access to the same God. In addition, the scriptures that condemn all these evils were in print while Brigham was still alive. In addition, your condemnation of Brigham in these points is ill-informed, particularly with regard to Adam-God and blood atonement, neither of which infiltrated Mormon theology.

I want to talk about Brigham's racism for a moment, however, as this is the flaw in his character I find most troubling and which, arguably, has done the most damage to the Church as a whole.

A cousin of mine, who wrote his own version of a CES Letter when he left the Church, called my attention to one of Brigham's most incendiary – and misinterpreted – racial statements. I'll share it with you, although you've probably heard it before.

Shall I tell you the law of God in regard to the African race? If the white man who belongs to the chosen seed mixes his blood with the seed of Cain, the penalty, under the law of God, is death on the spot. This will always be so.

– Brigham Young, as found in the [*Journal of Discourses 10:111*](#)

Yikes.

Then I read Brigham Young's full sermon in which that quote is found, and I had a remarkable experience that made me feel a whole lot better about Brigham Young's racial attitudes than I ever had before.

In the preceding paragraph to the one I quoted, Brigham makes the following statement:

I am no abolitionist, neither am I a proslavery man; I hate some of their principles and especially

some of their conduct, as I do the gates of hell.

What principles and conduct does he hate, then? In this sermon, he makes it clear that he hates how proslavery men feel they can abuse and savage their “property” at will. For instance, just two paragraphs after he makes the incendiary statement you posted, he says this:

If the Government of the United States, in Congress assembled, had the right to pass an anti-polygamy bill, they had also the right to pass a law that slaves should not be abused as they have been; they had also a right to make a law that negroes should be used like human beings, and not worse than dumb brutes. For their abuse of that race, the whites will be cursed, unless they repent.

I am neither an abolitionist nor a pro-slavery man. If I could have been influenced by private injury to choose one side in preference to the other, I should certainly be against the pro-slavery side of the question.”

Already, those past two paragraphs make him far more enlightened than a good chunk of the 19th Century populace. Consider, for instance, this statement:

I am not now, nor ever have been in favor of bringing about in any way the social or political equality of the white and black races. I am not now nor ever have been in favor of making voters or jurors of Negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office, nor of intermarriages with white people. There is a physical difference between the white and the black races which will forever forbid the two races living together on social or political equality. There must be a position of superior and inferior, and I am in favor of assigning the superior position to the white man.

— Abraham Lincoln

But could anything possibly justify the incendiary statement you quoted at the outset? Let’s look at the money sentence, where Brigham says that “[i]f the white man who belongs to the chosen seed mixes his blood with the seed of Cain, the penalty, under the law of God, is death on the spot.”

This comes in the midst of a sermon that, overall, has little or nothing to do with race. Every other mention of race is in the paragraphs I previously shared, and those are clearly derisive of white people who abuse slaves and treat them like animals. So why suddenly bring up the whole issue of a death penalty for interracial marriage?

Well, wait a minute. He makes no mention of marriage. And he only suggests one party in the group ought to be put to death – the “white man of the chosen seed.” Where is the mention of the black woman being put to death? It’s not there. Why isn’t it there? Because in the act Brigham is describing, those black women are victims who have done nothing wrong.

In 1863, when this sermon was given, there was no clamor for interracial marriage. The overwhelming majority of whites and blacks were repulsed by the idea, and Brigham would have had no need to rail against it.

So these “white men of the chosen seed” weren’t marrying these women; they were raping them.

Brigham, thankfully, wasn’t cool with that.

It was common practice, even among the relative handful of Latter-day Saints who owned slaves, to sexually assault their female slaves, causing some church leaders to decry the idea of men with “white wives” and “black concubines.” After all, the conventional wisdom went, there was no harm in doing whatever you wanted with what was wickedly considered to be mere subhuman property.

Brigham, again, is here saying that that’s just not cool. He’s saying that raping a black woman will call down the condemnation of God just as surely as the rape of a white woman will.

Incidentally, who are the “white men of the chosen seed?” If it’s all white men, then why does he add that “chosen seed” qualifier? Elsewhere in the same sermon, he rails against the pro-slavery whites in Missouri and their corruption and wickedness.

So they’re not the “chosen seed;” the Latter-day Saints are. So Brigham Young’s point, then, was that Latter-day Saints who rape their slaves deserve to be struck dead on the spot, and this “will always be so.”

I’m kinda OK with that.

Notice, too, that he talks about “the law of God,” and continually makes that the qualifier. In other words, that’s what these people deserve if God were fully in charge. But in many sermons, he also recognized the fact that the laws of God can only be enforced when God himself rules, and so, in the meantime we’re subject to the law of man – a law that Brigham himself was pretty much in charge of making.

So did Utah law call for the death penalty for interracial relationships? Nope. The law, according to an 1860 account, stated the following:

“Slaves coming into the Territory with their masters of their own free will, continue to be in all respects slaves, but cruelty and withholding proper food, raiment, etc., makes the ownership void. Every master or mistress who has carnal relations with his or her Negro slaves forfeits his or her right to the slaves, who thereby becomes the property of the commonwealth. Every individual man or woman who has carnal relations with a Negro or a negress who is sentenced to imprisonment not

exceeding three years, and to a fine from 500 to 1000 dollars.” (A Journey To Great Salt Lake City 1:469-70)

So, with this context, suddenly Brigham looks pretty darned enlightened, really. Yes, just like far too many Protestants of his age, he believed black people were descended from Cain and carried a curse, but Brigham’s statement is actually a statement that rises above the prevailing sentiments of the day, a statement that says these slaves are human beings, not animals, and you priesthood holders will be held accountable before God for how you treat them,

This is not to say Brigham Young wasn’t a racist. Certainly, by today’s standards, he was. And if this quote had originated from a recent leader, I think there’s little question that whoever uttered those words should be removed from office, be it the President of the Church, an Apostle, or the guy who sets up the chairs.

In 1863, however, I think the Lord would have a very hard time finding leaders who had enough racial understanding to be as shocked by those words as we are today.

Again, we’re told repeatedly that we learn line upon line; precept upon precept. Hymn #2, “The Spirit of God,” exults in the fact that “the Lord is extending the Saints’ understanding,” and I’m therefore very wary of judging social mores of 1852 by the light of what we now know as a church, a nation, and a world in the 21st Century.

Brigham’s reaction here actually suggests that he was taking a few more hints from God than you’re willing to concede.

Kinderhook Plates and Translator/Seer Claims Concerns & Questions:

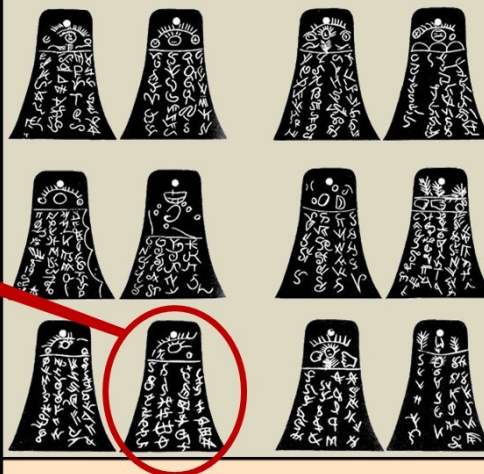
1. Kinderhook Plates:

Awesome! Who doesn’t like Kinderhook Plates?

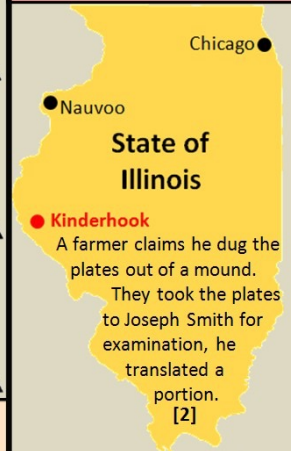
Kinderhook Plates

History of the line of Ham or Hoax?

This is an actual plate that is currently with the Chicago Historical Society. [1]

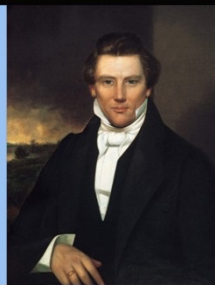


Plates were named after the town in which they were found



Joseph Smith translation:

"I insert fac-similes of the six brass plates found near Kinderhook... **I have translated a portion of them**, and find they contain the history of the person with whom they were found. He was a descendant of Ham, through the loins of Pharaoh, King of Egypt, and that he received his Kingdom from the ruler of heaven and earth." Prophet Joseph Smith, Jr. [3]



Above are facsimiles of the 6 double-sided Kinderhook Plates

The Hoax Uncovered

[4]

The plates turned out to be a hoax. Metallurgical tests revealed the plates to be of late 19th century construction. In addition, the script was created using a 19th-century chemical etch process.

In August, 1981 LDS Ensign Magazine conceded: "Kinderhook Plates Brought to Joseph Smith Appear to be a 19th-Century Hoax"

Joseph couldn't discern the fraud. The LDS church now concedes it's a hoax. What does this tell us about Joseph Smith's gift of translation?

[1] Letter from the Chicago Historical Society, 5/23/2005, <http://www.mormonthink.com/kinderhookweb.htm#wheresplatetoday>

[2] Joseph Smith the Prophet, His Family and His Friends, Volume 1, 1886, Affidavit, pp 207-8

[3] History of the Church, v. 5, p. 372

[4] Ensign Magazine, August 1981, "Kinderhook Plates Brought to Joseph Smith Appear to Be a Nineteenth-Century Hoax", Stanley B. Kimball

mormoninfographics.com

What's with all the MormonInfographics cribbing? Do you owe those guys money?

The quote from the History of the Church is actually a modified excerpt from William Clayton's journal, which was later rewritten into the History of the Church after Joseph's death as if the prophet had said it himself. It was not written by Joseph, who, as far as we know, never wrote anything about this subject. Certainly he made no translation of the fake plates.

What we do know is that when Joseph received the plates, he compared one character to a character on the Kirtland Egyptian Papers and found what appeared to be a match. So perhaps Clayton was accurate in saying he had "translated a portion of them" – i.e. a single character. One of the plates has a thingee that looks similar to a Ham-referencing boat-shaped symbol in the Kirtland Egyptian

Papers. That was it. Nothing supernatural took place. My guess is that after that single moment of excitement, Joseph quickly realized someone was pulling his leg and just moved on to other things.

Best detailed summation of all things Kinderhook [can be found online here](#).

2. Book of Abraham:

As outlined in the “Book of Abraham” section, Joseph Smith got everything wrong about the papyri, the facsimiles, the names, the gods, the scene context, the fact that the papyri and facsimiles were 1st century CE funerary text, who was male, who was female, etc. It’s gibberish.

Gloovy binglurf sharbabrabanian. That, my friend, is gibberish.

You’re just repeating yourself here. My prior response still stands.

There is not one single non-LDS Egyptologist who supports Joseph’s Book of Abraham or its claims. Even LDS Egyptologists acknowledge there are serious problems with the Book of Abraham and Joseph’s claims.

I clicked on your link and got pages and pages of stuff like this:

“%PDF-1.7 %âãÏÓ 2 0 obj <stream x_•[ÇqçßçSLø...”

Now that’s some high quality gibberish.

In any case, we’ve been over this. Non-LDS Egyptologists generally don’t pay attention to the Book of Abraham, and there are startling parallels between the book and ancient Abrahamic traditions. Other sites tell me your faulty link goes to a single article by a single LDS Egyptologist who is not as critical as you claim him to be.

Joseph Smith made a claim that he could translate ancient documents. This is a testable claim.

Not if you don’t have the original documents to compare to the translation.

Joseph failed the test with the Book of Abraham.

Only if you assume that the scraps we have are the actual source material, which they aren’t.

He failed the test with the Kinderhook Plates.

He did? Do you know of a translation of the Kinderhook Plates that everyone else has missed? Since he didn’t translate the fake plates, how could this matter have any bearing on his abilities as a translator?

With this modus operandi and track record, I'm now supposed to believe that Joseph has the credibility of translating the keystone Book of Mormon?

Except the Book of Mormon came first and established the M.O. It's a complex and internally consistent document that stands on its own merits. Certainly you have not offered a coherent alternative explanation for its existence. Now you're trying to fallaciously discredit it based on the false premise that we have the source material for the Book of Abraham. You're also falsely claiming that Joseph translated false plates that he didn't translate.

With a rock in a hat?

Sure. Why not? How is a rock in a hat inherently weirder than ancient biblical granny glasses tied to a metal breastplate? Just saying "rock in a hat" doesn't do anything to discredit the Book of Mormon – it's still here, and making fun of it doesn't make it go away.

That the gold plates that ancient prophets went through all the time and effort of making, engraving, compiling, abridging, preserving, hiding, and transporting were useless?

Who says they were useless? They were extraordinarily useful. They provided tangible evidence of the Book of Mormon's divine origins, and they were viewed by multiple witnesses, including many not mentioned in the official Three and Eight Witness testimonies. They also provide a stumbling block for critics who want to pretend Joseph made it all up have to account for the overwhelming physical evidence that Joseph actually had some kind of plates. (Hence the theories of forged tin plates, etc.) The plates tangibly tied the Book of Mormon to the ancient world. Very useful indeed, in my opinion.

Moroni's 5,000 mile journey lugging the gold plates from Mesoamerica (if you believe the unofficial apologists) all the way to New York to bury the plates, come back as a resurrected angel, and instruct Joseph for 4 years only for Joseph to translate instead using just a...rock in a hat?

So we keep coming back to the hat rock. What have you got against rocks in hats?

I wonder what process would have been sufficient to impress you. You sound like Naaman in the Old Testament. He got ticked off because the prophet told him to bathe seven times in the Jordan River to cure his leprosy. He wanted some far grander process, or at least a better river. If the rock hadn't been in the hat, would that have been better? Maybe if Moroni had stuck around personally to dictate to Oliver?

The rock in the hat is culturally odd to Jeremy Runnells and Jim Bennett and 21st Century folks, but it wasn't culturally odd to Joseph Smith, and since he was the one doing the translating, I don't see any problem with the Lord communicating with him by means of methods that would have been familiar to Joseph, even if they are strange to us.

A rock he found digging in his neighbor's property in 1822; a year before Moroni appeared in his bedroom, 5 years before he got the gold plates and Urim and Thummim, and the same stone and method Joseph used for his treasure hunting activities?

That's the one! It probably put his mind at ease to be able to have familiar frame of reference to help him relate to the overwhelming task of transitioning from "a boy of no consequence in the world" to a prophet, seer, and revelator.

Joseph Smith claimed to have translated three ancient records.


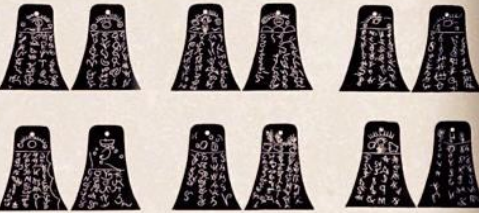

The Book of Abraham. Proven a fraud.

The Kinderhook Plates. Found to be a hoax.

The Book of Mormon. The only one of the three for which we do not have the original.

I'm sure he was only wrong on two out of three.

After all, wouldn't you buy a third car from a man who had already sold you two clunkers?



Again, Joseph Smith never translated the Kinderhook Plates or claimed that he had. That leaves us with two, not three, ancient records, and we do not have the original text for the Book of Abraham, so it has not been proven a fraud. Also, it's weird to call the Book of Mormon the third "clunker" when it's the one that came first.

Testimony/Spiritual Witness Concerns & Questions:

1. Every major religion has members who claim the same thing: God or God's spirit bore witness to them that their religion, prophet/pope/leaders, book(s), and teachings are true.

Hmmm. Are you sure about this? Because that's not actually how non-LDS Christians tend to operate.

You'd be hard-pressed to find Catholic sermons where priests implore their parishioners to pray to

know whether or not the Catholic church is true, or whether the Pope has been called of God. They rely on the weight of Catholic history and tradition and the argument of apostolic succession to establish their authority.

And while it's true that Protestants emphasize a spiritual experience with Jesus, they, too, lean on arguments from authority when it comes to any specific theology. The a priori assumption is that the Bible is infallible, and biblical proof-texts take precedence over Mormon-style claims of spiritual confirmation.

Joseph Fielding McConkie on page 83 of his book "Here We Stand," says that he has "frequently asked classes of returned missionaries if they ever met anyone who, while professing a belief in the Bible, could at the same time honestly say they prayed to know if it was true. I have yet to receive an affirmative response to that question." More McConkie, once more in purple, from the same book, pages 43 and 44:

An anti-Mormon book that uses the title *God's Word Final, Infallible, and Forever* gives its readers three standards that, if followed, will assure that they will not be caught in the Mormon net. Each of these standards, we are to assume, is rooted in the Bible. First, as readers we are warned not to pray about the message; after all, it is reasoned, people have been deceived by their prayers. The second warning is not to trust our feelings, because, we are told, feelings can also be deceptive. The third warning is not to trust our minds, for "our minds are reprobate." So, the book concludes, if we refuse to pray, to trust our feelings, and to use our minds, there is no chance the Mormons will get us. (That was the only conclusion in a lengthy book which I was able to agree.) What then are we to trust?

The answer is, of course, the Bible.

The premise that everyone has direct access to heaven and can – and should - receive personal revelation as confirmation of truth turns out to be a uniquely Mormon idea.

2. Just as it would be arrogant of a FLDS, Jehovah Witness, Catholic, Seventh-day Adventist, or Muslim to deny a Latter-day Saint's spiritual experience and testimony of the truthfulness of Mormonism, it would likewise be arrogant of a Latter-day Saint to deny their spiritual experiences and testimonies of the truthfulness of their own religion. Yet, every religion cannot be right together.

Have you ever had a Jehovah's Witness bear their testimony to you? A Muslim? A Catholic? That's just not how it works. Jehovah's Witnesses will spend all day long citing Bible verses to build a legalistic case to support their position, but never in a million years would they interrupt their Bible bashing by saying something like, "I know the Jehovah's Witnesses are true because the Spirit told me so."

You're looking at everything through a Mormon lens, and the frame of reference for other faiths is actually very different, which, I think, is due to the fact that they believe the scriptural canon is closed. There is no attempt to seek additional revelation because scripture, be it the Bible or the Koran, is all

the revelation we will ever have or need, and it would be blasphemy to ask God for any more.

As for the FLDS, you may have a point, as they share a theological history with us. Except a shared theological history with the mainstream LDS Church hasn't prevented the Community of Christ from abandoning any exclusive claims to truth. Mormons are actually far more unique here than you seem to realize.

LDS member in 2014: I know that Joseph Smith was a true prophet. I know the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the one and only true Church. I know the Book of Mormon is true. I know that Thomas S. Monson is the Lord's true Prophet today.

FLDS member in 2014: I know that Joseph Smith was a true prophet. I know the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints is the one and only true Church. I know the Book of Mormon is true. I know that Warren Jeffs is the Lord's true Prophet today.

RLDS member in 1975: I know that Joseph Smith was a true prophet. I know the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints is the one and only true Church. I know the Book of Mormon is true. I know that W. Wallace Smith is the Lord's true Prophet today.

LDCJC member in 2014: I know that Joseph Smith was a true prophet. I know The Latter Day Church of Jesus Christ is the one and only true Church. I know the Book of Mormon and the Book of Jeraneck are true. I know that Matthew P. Gill is the Lord's true Prophet, Seer, Revelator, and Translator today.

Where's the Catholic testimony in your examples? The testimony of the Jehovah's Witness or the Muslim? Your original premise was that all churches operate this way, yet you only use groups rooted in a common theology as your examples. You would never hear a Catholic, Protestant, Jew or Muslim bear this kind of testimony.

It's also telling that you have to reach back to 1975 to find an example of what the RLDS would say, because a modern Community of Christ member surely wouldn't speak this way.

That leaves us with the FLDS and the LDCJC, two tiny splinter groups rife with corruption, fraud, and pedophilia. Do I think we're right and they are deceived? Absolutely.

Same method: read, ponder, and pray.

That's not the Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, or Muslim method. In fact, for the centuries preceding Vatican II, the Catholics actively discouraged Bible reading in favor of study of church traditions.

Different testimonies. All four testimonies cannot simultaneously be true. This is the best God can come up with in revealing His truth to His children?

All *four* testimonies, huh? No more references to Muslim testimony meetings? You're conceding here

that the seeking of a testimony is a practice only rooted in the LDS tradition.

But to answer your question – yes, this is the best God can come up with in revealing His truth to His children. We ask, and He answers. Of course, our access to heaven is predicated on our faith and our righteousness, so it shouldn't be surprising that groups engaged in financial fraud and child rape are far less likely to gain that access and therefore far more likely to be deceived.

Only .2% of the world's population are members of God's true Church. This is God's model and standard of efficiency?

No, this is God's way of telling us we need to do our temple work, which will eventually provide 100% of the world's population, past and present, with the opportunity to fully accept or reject the gospel. Mormons are astonishingly inclusive here in a way that no other religion can match.

Praying about the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon does not follow that the LDS Church is true. The FLDS also believe in the Book of Mormon. So do 20+ Mormon splinter groups. They believe in the divinity of the Book of Mormon as well.

And they are right to do so. In the case of the FLDS and the LDCJC, they are also engaged in grievous sin, which distorts their ability to have the companionship of the Holy Ghost. As for the other groups, they're at varying levels of belief in the Book of Mormon. The Community of Christ has essentially downgraded it to the status of inspired fiction, and other groups have done the same.

Praying about the First Vision: Which account is true? They can't all be correct together as they conflict with one another.

We covered this. They're actually quite consistent with each other, and you see conflicts that aren't there.

3. If God's method to revealing truth is through feelings, it's a pretty ineffective method.

That's true, which is why this is only part of God's method. D&C 8:2 gives us this promise: "Yea, behold, I will tell you in your **mind and** in your heart, by the Holy Ghost." [Emphasis added.] Yes, the heart and its feelings are part of the equation, but they are also accompanied by the imparting of intelligence. Spiritual experiences are intellectual as well as emotional. Joseph Fielding McConkie used to say that the Lord has never given us a mindless revelation. Genuine spiritual experience sink deeply into every part of us, and they are far more profound than just warm fuzzies.

Perhaps the best example of this is Joseph Smith's own experience in reading James 1:5. He

describes his personal revelation in the following terms:

“Never did any passage of scripture come with more power to the heart of man than this did at this time to mine. It seemed to enter with great force into every feeling of my heart. I reflected on it again and again, knowing that if any person needed wisdom from God, I did;”
- Joseph Smith – History 1:12

There’s a powerful feeling here, yes, but there’s also deep intellectual engagement. “I reflected on it again and again.” The Spirit does not require you to leave your brain at the Church’s front door.

We have thousands of religions and billions of members of those religions saying that their truth is God’s only truth and everyone else is wrong because they felt God or God’s spirit reveal the truth to them.

If that’s truly the case, then you ought to provide the testimonies that demonstrate this. Outside of the LDS tradition, that’s not generally how other religions define their relationship with their church or with God.

4. Joseph Smith received a revelation, through the peep stone in his hat, to send Hiram Page and Oliver Cowdery to Toronto, Canada for the sole purpose of selling the copyright of the Book of Mormon, which is another concern in itself (why would God command to sell the copyright to His word?).

Perhaps because it could provide the fledgling Church with revenue in order to fulfill its mission. Same reason he asks us to pay tithing, really.

Glad you got another mention of the rock in the hat in there, though. I was beginning to think you’d forgotten about it, as you’d gone several paragraphs without bringing it up.

The mission failed and the prophet was asked why his revelation was wrong.

Here’s the revelation in question. It’s hard to read, because it’s a direct transcription from the [Joseph Smith Papers](#), complete with original spelling, grammar, and some digital detritus thrown in the mix:

“Blessing² & Behold I also covenanted with those who have assisted him in my work that I will do unto them even the same³ Because they have done that which is pleasing in my sight⁴(yea even all save M^ottin only⁵ it be one only) Wherefore be dilligent in Securing the Copy right of my Servent work upon all the face of the Earth of which is known by you unto unto my Servent Joseph & unto him whom he willeth accordinng as I shall command him that the

faithful & the righteous may retain the temporal Blessing as well as the Spirit[u]al & also that my work be not destroyed by the workers of iniquity to their own destruction & damnation when they are fully ripe & now Behold I say unto you that I have covenanted & it Pleaseth me that Oliver Cowdrey Joseph Knight Hiram Page & Josiah Stowel shall do my work in this thing yea even in securing the <Copy> right & they shall do it with an eye single to my Glory that it may be the means of bringing souls unto me Salvation through mine only Begotten Behold I am God I have spoken it & it is expedient in me Wherefor I say unto you that ye shall go to Kingston⁶ seeking me continually through mine only Begotten & if ye do this ye shall have my spirit to go with you & ye shall have an addition of all things which is expedient in me. & I grant unto my servant a privilege that he may sell <a copyright> through you speaking after the manner of men for the four Provinces⁷ **if the People harden not their hearts against the enticeings of my spirit & my word** for Behold it lieth in themselves to their condemnation & or to their salvation Behold my way is before you & the means I will prepare & the Blessing I hold in mine own hand & if ye are faithful I will pour out upon you even as much as ye are able to Bear & thus it shall be Behold I am the father & it is through mine only begotten which is Jesus Christ your Redeemer amen [p. 31]”

Not sure if you can see the emphasis I added in there, but the revelation includes a phrase that this will be fulfilled only “if the People harden not their hearts against the enticeings [sic] of my spirit & my word.” The people hardened their hearts, and so the copyright wasn’t sold, and the revelation wasn’t wrong. Pretty straightforward.

Joseph decided to inquire of the Lord regarding the question. The following is a quote from Book of Mormon witness David Whitmer’s testimony:

“...and behold the following revelation came through the stone: ‘Some revelations are of God; and some revelations are of man: and some revelations are of the devil.’ So we see that the revelation to go to Toronto and sell the copy-right was not of God, but was of the devil or of the heart of man.”

– [David Whitmer, An Address to All Believers in Christ, p.31](#)

Testimony written 57 years after the fact when Whitmer was deeply disaffected with Joseph Smith and was providing reasons why Joseph should be seen as a fallen prophet.

(Tangentially, this 57-years-later testimony is also our main source for the rock-in-the-hat story you love so much, and its late date and Whitmer’s disaffection are the reasons the McConkies and the Joseph Fielding Smiths of the world reject the hat/stone idea.)

Whitmer didn’t participate in going to Canada, and accounts from those who accompanied Joseph on the trip contradict Whitmer’s opinion. The contemporaneous document makes it clear that the Lord told Joseph that the people of Canada had a say in whether or not the copyright would be sold. Whether or not Joseph actually said what Whitmer says he said does not change the fact that the actual outcome was consistent with the revelation.

How are we supposed to know what revelations are from God, from the devil, or from the heart of man if even the Prophet Joseph Smith couldn't tell?

That's an outstanding question. The fact is that we each have an individual responsibility to discern truth from error. "By the power of the Holy Ghost, ye may know the truth of all things." (Moroni 10:5) That's a promise given to all, not just prophets.

What kind of a god and method is this if Heavenly Father allows Satan to interfere with our direct line of communication to Him? Sincerely asking for answers?

I don't accept the premise of your question, as it's based on the idea that the revelation re: the Canadian copyright came from the devil, which I don't believe it did. I will say, however, that the Lord never interferes with agency, and people can receive "answers" that conveniently coincide with the answers they wanted or expected, which is a case of mistaking their own desires for the will of God.

I do, however, believe that when our hearts are pure and we are truly sincere, the Lord's voice will cut through any attempts by Satan to stifle it.

5. As a believing Mormon, I saw a testimony as more than just spiritual experiences and feelings. I saw that we had evidence and logic on our side based on the correlated narrative I was fed by the Church about its origins. I lost this confidence at 31-years-old when I discovered that the gap between what the Church teaches about its origins versus what the primary historical documents actually show happened, what history shows what happened, what science shows what happened...couldn't be further apart.

And yet here I am, still a believing Mormon who has looked at all the same documents that you have, and I still see we have evidence and logic on our side, as well as spiritual confirmation of that truth. How is that possible? Maybe it's because at every opportunity to interpret that same evidence, you take the point of view that is the most critical of Joseph and the Church and refuse to give the LDS argument the benefit of any doubts.

I read an experience that explains this in another way:

"I resigned from the LDS Church and informed my bishop that the reasons had to do with discovering the real history of the Church. When I was done he asked about the spiritual witness I had surely received as a missionary. I agreed that I had felt a sure witness, as strong as he currently felt. I gave him the analogy of Santa; I believed in Santa until I was 12. I refused to listen to reason from my friends who had discovered the truth much earlier...I just knew. However, once I learned the facts, feelings changed. I told him that Mormons have to re-define faith in order to believe; traditionally, faith is an instrument to bridge that gap

between where science, history and logic end, and what you hope to be true. Mormonism re-defines faith as embracing what you hope to be true in spite of science, fact and history.”

And far be it from me to second-guess someone else’s experience. What’s interesting, though, is how critical you are of those who bear their testimonies when confronted with difficult information, yet that’s exactly what you’re doing here. This person is bearing their testimony of the untruthfulness of the Gospel. It’s impossible to argue with a testimony, which may be why so many people, when backed into a corner, toss that out as the best they can do.

For my part, all I can say is that my experience has been markedly different than this one, and I don’t believe for one second that Mormons “have to re-define faith in order to believe.” I guess we’ll have to agree to disagree on this one.

6. Paul H. Dunn: Dunn was a General Authority of the Church for many years.

Indeed! I adored Paul H. Dunn. Still do. Marvelous speaker – funny, engaging, and perceptive.

He was a very popular speaker who told incredible faith-promoting war and baseball stories.

He told a lot of other stories, too. He spoke on a great deal of subjects, and, while he clearly made serious errors in judgment, he was, on the whole, a good and decent man.

Stories like how God protected him as enemy machine-gun bullets ripped away his clothing, gear, and helmet without ever touching his skin and how he was preserved by the Lord. Members of the Church shared how they really felt the Spirit as they listened to Dunn’s testimony and stories.

Well, I realize this is going to sound self-serving, but I was on my mission in an apartment in Dundee, Scotland, when I first heard a talk with that particular story. I remember thinking, “Hunh. That sounds a little too good to be true.” This wasn’t a major revelation – there were no alarm bells clanging, and I didn’t feel prompted to toss my Paul Dunn tapes into the trash.

But what that says to me is that the Spirit testifies of truth even when it’s being delivered by imperfect vessels, mainly because it is always being delivered by imperfect vessels. Paul Dunn’s false stories did not negate the confirmation of his true ones, and I’m willing to bet that other people had the same kind of nagging doubts I did about the stuff he was making up.

Unfortunately, Dunn was later caught lying about all his war and baseball stories and was forced to apologize to the members. He became the first General Authority to gain “emeritus” status and was removed from public Church life.

He was caught lying, yes. Don’t think that’s accurate re: first G.A. to gain “emeritus” status, but I can’t pinpoint it one way or the other. I remember being in the Tabernacle after the

scandal when Paul Dunn received an award for something or other, so I think it's a bit over-the-top to say he was "removed from public Church life."

What about the members who felt the Spirit from Dunn's fabricated and false stories?

I'm not convinced they did feel the Spirit when Paul Dunn was not telling the truth. They may have felt emotionally moved – Paul Dunn was a very dynamic speaker, after all, and his stories tugged at the heartstrings – but that's not the same thing as feeling the spirit.

What does this say about the Spirit and what the Spirit really is?

Quite a lot, actually. It says the Spirit testifies of truth wherever it is found, and even in unlikely places and from imperfect vessels. The vast majority of what Paul Dunn said was true, and the Spirit didn't deprive those listening to him of confirmation of the truths he told even though Elder Dunn made poor choices. It also tells us that we each have a responsibility to discern truth from error, and we do not abdicate that responsibility to someone else's ecclesiastical position, because even our leaders are fallible.

7. The following are counsel from Elder Boyd K. Packer, Elder Dallin H. Oaks and Elder Neil L. Andersen on how to gain a testimony:

"It is not unusual to have a missionary say, 'How can I bear testimony until I get one? How can I testify that God lives, that Jesus is the Christ, and that the gospel is true? If I do not have such a testimony, would that not be dishonest?' Oh, if I could teach you this one principle: a testimony is to be found in the bearing of it!" – Boyd K. Packer, [The Quest for Spiritual Knowledge](#)

This is one of my favorite talks by Elder Packer, and you seem to be missing the point of it entirely. Elder Packer is not instructing people to lie; quite the opposite, in fact. "You cannot force spiritual things," he says. "You must await the growth." These are not the instructions of someone telling people to get out and lie for the Lord.

The next paragraph after the one you quote clarifies his intent:

"Somewhere in your quest for spiritual knowledge, there is that "leap of faith," as the philosophers call it. It is the moment when you have gone to the edge of the light and stepped into the darkness to discover that the way is lighted ahead for just a footstep or two. "The spirit of man is," as the scripture says, indeed "the candle of the Lord" ([Proverbs 20:27](#)).

It is one thing to receive a witness from what you have read or what another has said; and that is a necessary beginning. It is quite another to have the Spirit confirm to you in your bosom that what you have testified is true. Can you not see that it will be supplied as you share it? As you give that which you have, there is a replacement, with increase!

To speak out is the test of your faith."

This talk helped me to understand faith and how it works, namely that if you push yourself to your limit, the Lord shows you the next steps. It's a talk that confirms the principle found in Ether 12:6 - "I would show unto the world that faith is things which are hoped for and not seen; wherefore, dispute not because ye see not, for ye receive no witness until after the trial of your faith."

Indulge me as I share a practical example from my own life. Every year since the beginning of time, the extended Cornell family attends Aspen Grove Family Camp up in Provo Canyon. Being morbidly afraid of heights, I spent years avoiding Aspen Grove's massive ropes course, where you climb up into the trees and walk around on metal wires that are about thirty feet above the ground. You're attached to belay lines and are perfectly safe, but even though I mentally understood that, that didn't keep my legs from wobbling like jelly with every step I took when I finally tried the thing. It wasn't until I actually fell and the belay mechanisms caught me that I got a feel for just how safe I was, and I was able to move forward in a terror-free manner.

That's the experience that gave me a hands-on practical lesson in faith.

The reason we "receive no witness until after the trial of [our] faith" is not because God is refusing to let us in on His secrets. The truth is that that's the way faith works. No matter how much one of those nice Aspen Grove staffers were to describe to me the safety features of the helmets and the ropes and the carabiners – I dig the word "carabiner" – it wasn't until I actually tested the stuff for myself that I was able to develop the faith and confidence to rely on them.

"Faith," therefore, is not synonymous with "belief," or passive intellectual assent. Intellectually, I believed I was safe from the first moment. But my negligible faith – my willingness and confidence to act on that belief – didn't gain strength until after it had been tried. Elder Packer is merely pointing out that exercising enough faith to bear a testimony will provide the spiritual confirmation necessary to strengthen it. That's a true principle that has been verified time and time again.

"Another way to seek a testimony seems astonishing when compared with the methods of obtaining other knowledge. We gain or strengthen a testimony by bearing it. Someone even suggested that some testimonies are better gained on the feet bearing them than on the knees praying for them."

- Dallin H. Oaks, [Testimony](#)

Context is helpful here, too. In this talk, Elder Oaks also counsels people to fast, pray, and study in order to build a testimony. Neither he nor Elder Packer are asking people to bear a testimony that they do not believe to be true.

As a young man, I remember asking my own father how I could bear a testimony when I didn't actually know that the Church was true. "Do you believe the Church is true?" he asked me. I said that I did. "Well, why can't you say that? If that's the extent of your testimony, there's no shame in sharing where you are." I then found that bearing that degree of testimony

– I had faith and belief – strengthened my personal conviction. Accompanied with study and prayer, I can now stand up and testify to my knowledge of the truthfulness of the Restored Gospel, and my bearing of the testimony I had was instrumental in building the testimony I have.

“It may come as you bear your own testimony of the Prophet...Consider recording the testimony of Joseph Smith in your own voice, listening to it regularly...Listening to the Prophet’s testimony in your own voice will help bring the witness you seek.”

- Neil L. Andersen, Joseph Smith

When I read this with your ellipses, I assumed Elder Andersen was counseling people to record their own personal testimony of the prophet and listen to it, which admittedly seemed strange. You’ve done some very selective and misleading editing here, as that isn’t what Elder Andersen was saying at all.

The first sentence you quote is from an entirely different paragraph and is not connected to the rest of the text. Here’s his pertinent statement without the ellipses:

Next, read the testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith in the Pearl of Great Price or in this pamphlet, now in 158 languages. You can find it online at LDS.org or with the missionaries. This is Joseph’s own testimony of what actually occurred. Read it often. Consider recording the testimony of Joseph Smith in your own voice, listening to it regularly, and sharing it with friends. Listening to the Prophet’s testimony in your own voice will help bring the witness you seek.

He’s not asking people to bear their own testimonies and listen to themselves saying “I know Joseph Smith was a prophet.” He’s asking people to read Joseph Smith – History, which will strengthen their testimony. He then asks them to consider recording *the* testimony of Joseph Smith – i.e. “I saw a pillar of light, etc.” – not recording *their* testimony of Joseph Smith - i.e. saying “I know it’s true” over and over again.

In other words, repeat things over and over until you convince yourself that it’s true. Just keep telling yourself, “I know it’s true...I know it’s true...I know it’s true” until you believe it and voilà! You now have a testimony that the Church is true and Joseph Smith was a prophet.

Nope. If you follow Elder Andersen’s instructions – a suggestion, really, as advice to “consider” something isn’t really an apostolic mandate - you won’t be telling yourself “I know it’s true” over and over again; you’ll be listening to and pondering Joseph’s words, not your own.

You’ve grossly distorted both Elder Andersen’s words and his intent here.

How is this honest? How is this ethical?

It certainly isn’t honest or ethical to grossly distort an apostle’s words and intent.

What kind of advice are these Apostles giving when they're telling you that if you don't have a testimony, bear one anyway?

That's not what they're saying.

How is this not lying?

Because no one is being asked to say anything they don't believe is true.

There's a difference between saying you know something and you believe something.

Yes, and one can bear a testimony of both. Bearing testimony of one will strengthen the testimony of the other.

What about members and investigators who are on the other side listening to your "testimony"? How are they supposed to know whether you actually do have a testimony of Mormonism or if you're just following Packer's, Oaks' and Andersen's counsel and you're lying your way into one?

Elders Packer, Oaks, and Andersen would agree that nobody should lie when they're bearing their testimony.

8. There are many members who share their testimonies that the Spirit told them that they were to marry this person or go to this school or move to this location or start up this business or invest in this investment. They rely on this Spirit in making critical life decisions.

Indeed, and I am very skeptical of such members. When teaching Sunday School, I will occasionally ask the class which brand of toothpaste the Lord would want them to use. This usually gets a laugh, as most people realize that the Lord doesn't care. People who expect spiritual confirmations to guide them through every decision in their life are conducting themselves contrary to [D&C 58:26](#), where the Lord says, "For behold, it is not meet that I should command in all things; for he that is compelled in all things, the same is a slothful and not a wise servant; wherefore he receiveth no reward."

The reason we were sent to Earth was to exercise our own agency and use our own judgment. Waiting around for the Lord to tell us what to do at every turn is essentially a low-grade version of the plan we rejected in the pre-mortal life.

But what about the big decisions? Who we marry, where we go to school, what we should do for a living? Personally, I prayed very hard to get a confirmation as to whether or not I should marry my wife. I received no answer one way or the other. Then I was kneeling across the altar from her in the Salt Lake Temple, and I got a very clear, sweet message from the Spirit that I was doing the right thing. That actually made me somewhat frustrated. I was thinking, "You know, Lord, I would have appreciated this if you'd given me this message just a few days ago." But in my experience, that's not how the Lord works. He expects me to make decisions and act on them, and only afterward does the confirmation come. I receive no witness until after the trial of my faith.

When the decision turns out to be not only incorrect but disastrous, the fault lies on the individual and never on the Spirit.

The Spirit never overrides our agency, so we are always accountable for our own decisions. That's the plan. And the Lord also knew that we would make mistakes, some of them disastrous. That's why the Infinite Atonement is at the center of the plan.

The individual didn't have the discernment or it was the individual's hormones talking or it was the individual's greed that was talking or the individual wasn't worthy at the time.

Those are all possibilities, but none of us are in a position to judge another's heart. We're also not always able to see if things that look like huge mistakes work out as blessings down the road.

This poses a profound flaw and dilemma: if individuals can be so convinced that they're being led by the Spirit but yet be so wrong about what the Spirit tells them, how can they be sure of the reliability of this same exact process in telling them that Mormonism is true?

I think the process you're describing is not the same process the Lord uses to communicate with his children. There's a reason the Spirit is referred to as a "still, small voice." It requires experience and effort and commitment to know how and when to listen, and the Spirit's gentle promptings can be overlooked or ignored when our focus is elsewhere. You seem to be advocating a process where the Spirit screams at us through a megaphone. Certainly that would be harder to ignore, but it would also defeat the purpose of mortality, which is to learn to exercise faith.

9. I felt the Spirit watching "Saving Private Ryan" and the "Schindler's List." Both R-rated and horribly violent movies.

Me, too. Other R-rated movies where I've felt the Spirit include "The Shawshank Redemption," and, most recently, "Spotlight." I think the counsel to avoid R-rated movies is a good general rule, but I don't think the Motion Picture Association of America is infallible, either, nor do I think they have a mandate from heaven. There are valuable lessons and profound truths in both of those movies, so it doesn't surprise me that the Spirit would bear witness to them.

I also felt the Spirit watching "Forrest Gump" and the "Lion King."

Well, okay. Except I think "Lion King" in particular is just plain awful, although I recognize that's a minority position.

After I lost my testimony, I attended a conference where former Mormons shared their stories. The same Spirit I felt telling me that Mormonism is true and that Joseph Smith was a true prophet is the same Spirit I felt in all of the above experiences.

Well, here I begin to wonder what it is you think is the Spirit, especially since you no longer

really believe there is a Spirit.

Does this mean that Lion King is true? That Mufasa is real and true? Does this mean that Forrest Gump is real and the story happened in real life?

This is a clear indication that you have a very warped understanding of what the Spirit actually is – or, more appropriately, who He is. When you felt the Spirit during “Forrest Gump,” was He telling you Forrest Gump was a historical figure? Because the Spirit isn’t an inanimate object; He is a member of the Godhead who imparts information, not just warm and pleasant feelings. As Joseph Smith taught, “No man can receive the Holy Ghost without receiving revelations. The Holy Ghost is a revelator.” (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, p. 328)

The Holy Ghost actually tells you what it is that He’s confirming.

When feeling the Spirit during Schindler’s List, for instance, He confirmed the truth that sacrifices made to save Jews during World War II were noble and good, and that I was seeing a story that reinforced true and good virtues. During The Shawshank Redemption, He confirmed that friendship and compassion are of infinite worth. During “Spotlight,” He confirmed that it was right to call attention to the terrible child abuse taking place in the Catholic church.

For you to ask whether feeling the Spirit means that Mufasa truly exists, you give the impression that you see the Spirit as something akin to the buzzer that rings at church when there are five minutes left in Sunday School. To you, He’s a thing, not a person, and, furthermore, He’s a thing that can only impart binary information. (I.E. Warm feelings means this is historical; no warm feelings means this is not.) This actually makes me very sad, because if you could spend your whole life in the Church and ask if a good feeling you have during the Lion King is spiritual confirmation that Mufasa was a historical figure, then there is something fundamentally wrong with how we teach children – and adults, for that matter – about how the Spirit operates.

Why did I feel the Spirit as I listened to the stories of apostates sharing how they discovered for themselves that Mormonism is not true?

How can you say you felt the Spirit after you rejected the existence of a Spirit as you listened to people deny that there actually is a Spirit? Especially after you think feeling the Spirit confirms the physical existence of cartoon characters?

Why is this Spirit so unreliable and inconsistent?

He isn’t. Your own spiritual education, however, seems to have been far more unreliable and inconsistent than it ought to have been.

How can I trust such an inconsistent and contradictory Source for knowing that Mormonism is worth betting my life, time, money, heart, mind, and obedience to?

You can’t. Because based on your observations here, which are the only ones you’ve been listening to



bears little or no resemblance to the Spirit.

This thought-provoking video raises some profound questions and challenges to the Latter-day Saint concept of “testimony” and receiving a witness from the Holy Ghost or Spirit as being a unique, reliable, and trustworthy source to discerning truth and reality:

These are essentially the same questions and challenges you've raised in your text, and my above responses apply to this video as well.

Priesthood Restoration Concerns & Questions:

“The late appearance of these accounts raises the possibility of later fabrication.”

– LDS Historian Richard Bushman, [Rough Stone Rolling](#), p. 75 –

Are you saying that Richard Bushman believes that these accounts were fabricated? Because Richard Bushman doesn't believe these accounts were fabricated, and it's dishonest of you to yank a single sentence out of a paragraph to give the impression that he does.

The full paragraph:

*The late appearance of these accounts raises the possibility of later fabrication. Did Joseph add the stories of angels to embellish his early history and make himself more of a visionary? **If so, he made little of the occurrence. Cowdery was the first to recount the story of John's appearance, not Joseph himself.** In an 1834 Church newspaper, Cowdery exulted in his still fresh memory of the experience. “On a sudden, as from the midst of eternity, the voice of the Redeemer spake peace unto us, while the vail was parted and the angel of God came down clothed with glory, and delivered the anxiously looked for message, and the keys of the gospel of repentance!” When Joseph described John's visit, he was much more plainspoken. Moreover, he inserted the story into a history composed in 1838 but not published until 1842. It circulated without fanfare, more like a refurbished memory than a triumphant announcement. [Emphasis added]*

1. Like the First Vision story, none of the members of the Church or Joseph Smith's family had ever heard prior to 1834 about a priesthood restoration from John the Baptist or Peter, James, and John.

And like your error with regard to the First Vision story, you assume that if something wasn't yet written down in its entirety, that constitutes proof that it was never spoken of or discussed, which is a wholly ridiculous assumption.

Although the priesthood is now taught to have been restored in 1829, Joseph and Oliver made no such claim until 1834.

Nonsense. People were being ordained to the priesthood beginning in 1830. How could they be ordained if Joseph and Oliver made no claim to its restoration? As for the details about Peter, James, and John, actually, only Oliver provided those details in written form in 1834. Joseph didn't mention anything about this until 1838, as Bushman recounts above. When Joseph did make the claim, it “circulated without fanfare,” which would be surprising if this were a sensational piece of information that the Saints had never heard before.

Why did it take five years for Joseph or Oliver to tell members of the Church about the

priesthood?

It didn't. Joseph and Oliver announced they had been baptized and ordained the day the Church was organized, and revelations prior to 1834 make reference to their priesthood authority.

2. Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery did not teach anyone or record anything prior to 1834 that men ordained to offices in the Church were receiving "priesthood authority."

That's a nonsensical statement. Read Section 20 of the Doctrine and Covenants, recorded in 1830, which outlines the offices and duties of the priesthood. You're suggesting that people who were "ordained" to be "priests," the quoted words being used in the revelation, didn't realize they had priesthood authority? What kind of priest has no priesthood?

Also, look at the Book of Mormon. Alma 13 described priesthood authority in great detail, and there are several other references to priesthood throughout the book. The Book of Mormon was also published in 1830.

3. Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery changed the wording of earlier revelations when they compiled the 1835 Doctrine & Covenants, adding verses about the appearances of John the Baptist and Peter, James, and John as if those appearances were mentioned in the earlier revelations in the Book of Commandments, which they weren't.

And, as mentioned earlier, Joseph changed the wording of several verses in the Book of Mormon after it was first published. He edited a number of his revelations over the course of his life. That's actually the very nature of the Restoration – we do not believe in inerrant prophets or in inerrant scripture, and, unlike Catholics or Protestants who believe in a closed canon, we believe more light and knowledge is always welcome.

4. Were the restoration of the Aaronic Priesthood under the hand of John the Baptist recorded in the Church prior to 1833, it would have appeared in the Book of Commandments.

Really? Why? The First Vision was recorded in 1832. Why doesn't it appear in the Book of Commandments? Isn't a visit from the Lord a bigger deal than a visit from John the Baptist?

It's not recorded anywhere in the Book of Commandments.

There's no biographical info at all recorded in the Book of Commandments. This was not a book used to establish Joseph's authority; it was a book used to catalogue revelations of direct relevance to the early members of the Church. That's why several early revelations didn't make the cut.

Were the restoration of the Melchizedek Priesthood under the hands of Peter, James, and John recorded prior to 1833, it would have appeared in the Book of Commandments. It's

not recorded anywhere in the Book of Commandments.

Look at the New Testament. How many times do the apostles make reference to Jesus's biography in their epistles? How many times do they mention the Virgin Birth, or his baptism at the hands of John the Baptist, or the keys he received from Moses and Elias on the Mount of Transfiguration? Precisely zero times. Epistles, like the Book of Commandments, were written directly to believers who already accepted the authority of the people writing to them.

5.It wasn't until the 1835 edition Doctrine & Covenants that Joseph and Oliver backdated and retrofitted Priesthood restoration events to an 1829-30 time period – none of which existed in any previous Church records; including Doctrine & Covenants' precursor, The Book of Commandments, nor the original Church history as published in The Evening and Morning Star.

For them to be “backdating and retrofitting” events, they would have to be correcting an erroneous record. There's no alternative record of different priesthood restoration events, so no “retrofit” was necessary. Members of the Church were well acquainted with the priesthood by 1835, so they obviously believed it came from somewhere before Joseph and Oliver got around to writing down the details. If Joseph and Oliver were suddenly making it all up five years after the fact, members would have likely noticed. The fact that Joseph, in particular, is relatively casual about the whole thing until 1838 is clear evidence that this was not a new story to the Saints.

6.David Whitmer, one of the witnesses to the Book of Mormon, had this to say about the Priesthood restoration:

“I never heard that an Angel had ordained Joseph and Oliver to the Aaronic Priesthood until the year 1834[,] [183]5, or [183]6 – in Ohio...I do not believe that John the Baptist ever ordained Joseph and Oliver...”
– Early Mormon Documents, 5:137

Whitmer himself was given priesthood authority in 1829, as referenced in a contemporaneous revelation recorded in [D&C 18:9](#). He didn't doubt the veracity of that authority while he was a member of the Church. Only decades later, when he was severely disaffected from Joseph Smith, does he begin to criticize the details.

Witnesses Concerns & Questions:

1.The testimony of the Three and Eight witnesses to the Book of Mormon is a key part to the testimonies of many members of the Church. Some even base their testimony of the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon on these 11 witnesses and their testimonies.

If they do, then they're not following the instructions of the Book of Mormon itself, which counsels members to base their testimonies in the witness of the Holy Ghost. That's not to discount the value of the testimony of these 11 witnesses, which are

remarkably consistent and reliable, but rather to emphasize that this kind of evidence ought to confirm faith rather than establish it.

As a missionary, I was instructed to teach investigators about the testimonies of the witnesses to the Book of Mormon as part of boosting the book's credibility.

When did you serve your mission? None of the six discussions I taught made any reference to Book of Mormon witnesses, although I'm older than you, and they've changed the discussions since. I'd be surprised, however, if these testimonies were actually included in the prescribed lessons to be taught to investigators.

There are several critical problems for relying and betting on these 19th century men as credible witnesses.

The problems you proceed to enumerate are based largely on the premise that these people are, in fact "19th century men" who believed things common to many 19th century men. How could the Book of Mormon have had any witnesses who were not "19th century men," given that it came forth in the 19th Century?

2. Magical Worldview: In order to truly understand the Book of Mormon witnesses and the issues, one must understand the magical worldview of people in early 19th century New England. These are people who believed in folk magic, divining rods, visions, second sight, peep stones in hats, treasure hunting (money digging or glass looking), and so on.

Your point being? People then – and people now – believed and believe in a number of harmless superstitions. Why does this disqualify them from being instruments in the hands of the Lord? The evidence suggests that belief in folk magic left Joseph and Oliver open to the idea of genuine revelation.

Many people believed in buried treasure, the ability to see spirits and their dwelling places within the local hills and elsewhere. This is why treasure digging existed.

Yes! Treasure digging existed because people believed in buried treasure. Seems a bit obvious.

Joseph Smith, his father, and his brother (Hyrum) had a family business treasure hunting from 1820 – 1827.

No, they didn't. Joseph Smith, his father, and his brother (Hyrum) had a family business called a "farm." Check the tax records.

Joseph was hired by folks like Josiah Stowell, who Joseph mentions in his history.

It's kind of disingenuous to say that "Joseph was hired by folks like Josiah Stowell" when we only have record of Joseph being hired by one "folk" – i.e. Josiah Stowell. If

you can produce other clients for this non-existent treasure hunting business, that would bolster your case considerably.

As for Josiah Stowell, Joseph worked for him for less than a month digging for silver with no success, until he “finally... prevailed with the old gentleman to cease digging after it.” (JS-H 1:56.) Hardly a long-term career pursuit.

In 1826, Joseph was arrested and brought to court in Bainbridge, New York, for trial on fraud.

Joseph was neither arrested nor brought to trial. He was called to appear at a preliminary hearing on the matter of being a “disorderly person,” and the hearing was dismissed with no charges filed. The matter was so insignificant that it was never raised again, even as Joseph was forced to confront a host of other far more serious legal charges throughout his life.

He was arrested on the complaint of Stowell’s nephew who accused Joseph of being a “disorderly person and an imposter.”

The word “arrested” has a specific meaning that implies Joseph was taken into custody, which he was not. The word first appears in an 1877 anti-Mormon account half a century later, but there is reason to assume this is hyperbole. There’s no record that Joseph went to jail. The judge considered the accusation baseless, and the matter was quickly dismissed.

It would not be unusual for a neighbor, friend, or even a stranger to come up to you and say, “I received a vision of the Lord!” and for you to respond, “What did the Lord say?”

It would also not be unusual for a neighbor, friend, or even a stranger to say “Does anyone know what we’re having for dinner?” I don’t get your point here, or how it in any way discredits anybody of anything.

This is one of the reasons why 21st century Mormons, once including myself, are so confused and bewildered when hearing stuff like Joseph Smith using a peep stone in a hat or Oliver Cowdery using a divining rod or dowsing rod such as illustrated below:



I, too, am a 21st Century Mormon, and I find this neither confusing nor bewildering. I find it evidence that Joseph and Oliver lived in a different place and time and believed in harmless superstitions that were common to their era.

My wife was a missionary in Chile. In almost every home she visited, including homes of Church members, people had an inflated brown paper bag in the center of the main living area, because they were convinced that the bag kept bugs away. They also chastised her for drinking cold drinks on a hot day, or hot drinks on a cold day, as they insisted that would make a person “choiko,” which roughly translates as “crooked.” Both of these ideas have no factual basis and are firmly in the realm of superstition, yet members who believe them don’t get denied temple recommends.

The above divining rod is mentioned in the scriptures. In Doctrine & Covenants 8, the following heading provides context for the discussion:

“Revelation given through Joseph Smith the Prophet to Oliver Cowdery, at Harmony, Pennsylvania, April 1829. In the course of the translation of the Book of Mormon, Oliver, who continued to serve as scribe, writing at the Prophet’s dictation, desired to be endowed with the gift of translation. The Lord responded to his supplication by granting this revelation.”

The revelation states, in relevant part:

6. Now this is not all they gift; for you have another gift, which is the gift of Aaron; behold, it has told you many things;
7. Behold, there is no other power, save the power of God, that can cause this gift of Aaron to be with you.
8. Therefore, doubt not, for it is the gift of God; and you shall hold it in your hands, and do marvelous works; and no power shall be able to take it away out of your hands, for it is the work of God.
9. And, therefore, whatsoever you shall ask me to tell you by that means, that I will grant unto you, and you shall have knowledge concerning it.
10. Remember that without faith you can do nothing; therefore ask in faith. Trifle not with these things; do not ask for that which you ought not.
11. Ask that you may know the mysteries of God, and that you may translate and receive knowledge from all those ancient records which have been hid up, that are sacred; and according to your faith shall it be done unto you.

(D&C 8:6-11, emphasis added)

From the D&C 8 account, we don’t really know much about what exactly the “gift of Aaron” is that Oliver Cowdery received. What is “the gift of Aaron”? The text provides several clues:

- Oliver has a history of using it, since “it has told [him] many things.”

- It is “the gift of God.”
- It is to be held in Oliver’s hands (and kept there, impervious to any power).
- It allows Oliver to “do marvelous works.”
- It is “the work of God.”
- The Lord will speak through it to Oliver and tell him anything he asks while using it.
- It works through faith.
- It enables Oliver to translate ancient sacred documents.

With only these clues, the “gift of Aaron” remains very hard to identify. The task becomes much easier, however, when we look at the original revelation contained in The Book of Commandments, a predecessor volume to the Doctrine & Covenants, used by the LDS Church before 1835. [Section 7 of the Book of Commandments](#) contains wording that was changed in the [Doctrine & Covenants 8](#). The term “gift of Aaron” was originally “rod” and “rod of nature” in the Book of Commandments:

“Now this is not all, for you have another gift, which is the gift of working with the rod: behold it has told you things: behold there is no other power save God, that can cause this rod of nature, to work in your hands.”

– [The Book of Commandments 7:3](#)

So, what is the “gift of Aaron” mentioned in D&C 8? It is a “rod of nature.”

What is a “rod of nature”? It is a divining rod or dowsing rod as illustrated in the above images, which Oliver Cowdery used to hunt for buried treasure.

Didn’t want to interrupt you until you had fully made your point on this one, although I’m still not quite sure what your point is. What seems evident is that the Lord was communicating with Oliver by means of a common frame of reference he was likely to understand. If Oliver had confidence in a harmless superstition, then why shouldn’t the Lord use that superstition as a stepping stone toward a better appreciation of spiritual gifts? “Behold, I am God and have spoken it; these commandments are of me, and were given unto my servants **in their weakness, after the manner of their language, that they might come to understanding.**” ([D&C 1:24](#), Emphasis Added.) That’s the same reason he let Joseph use a seer stone, as it was something to which Joseph was already culturally accustomed. The fact that it is strange to our culture shouldn’t allow us to smugly condescend to those whose manner is different than ours.

Remember Ammon talking to King Lamoni about the Great Spirit in [Alma 22](#)? Lamoni’s understanding of God was mingled with superstition, but rather than condemn Lamoni for his superstitions, he built on the common ground in his incorrect tradition to lead Lamoni to a better understanding. That’s the way the Lord has always worked, and that’s all he’s doing here by indulging Oliver’s interest in dowsing rods. In the Old Testament, the Lord indulged Moses’s use of a rod to part the Red Sea, strike rocks to bring forth water, and raise up with a serpent wrapped around it in order to heal Israel. Could God have accomplished all those things through Moses without using a rod? Of course. But using the rod was apparently helpful to Moses, so God worked through Moses in his

weakness, and after the manner of his language and understanding. I don't see why that's a problem.

The revision to "gift of Aaron" connects the dowsing rod to Moses's rod, thereby leading Oliver to a greater understanding of the Lord's purposes. It's a rather elegant teaching method, it seems to me, to communicate by means of commonly understood iconography.

Cowdery's use of a divining rod to search for buried treasure evokes similar images of Joseph Smith hunting for treasure with a stone in a hat.

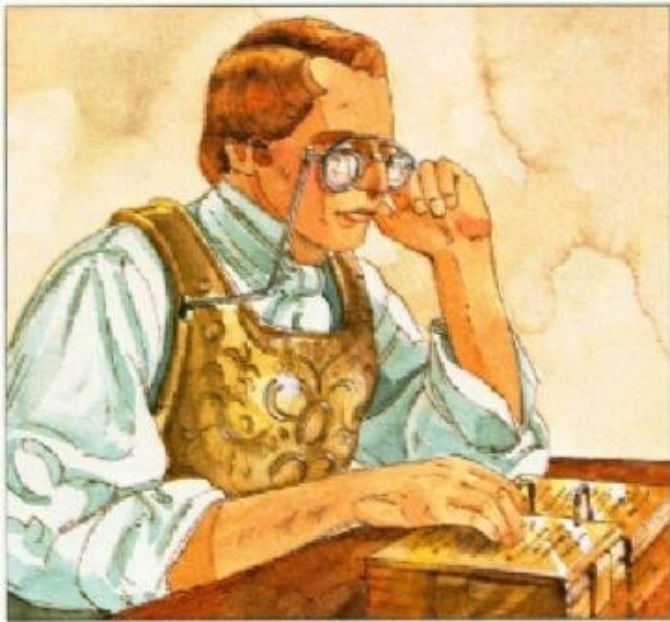
Stone in a hat?! Why haven't you ever mentioned that before?

Oliver also wished to use his divining rod, in the same way Joseph Smith used his stone and hat, to translate ancient documents. Doctrine & Covenants 8 indicates that the Lord, through Joseph Smith, granted Oliver's request to translate using a...rod.

Yes, he... did. Again, I don't understand what your problem is. The Lord was speaking to Oliver in his weakness, after the manner of his language, so to speak, just as he promised to do. What's wrong with a rod? Should we think Moses was a weirdo for using one, too?

If Oliver Cowdery's gift was really a divining rod then this tells us that the origins of the Church are much more rooted in folk magic and superstition than we've been led to believe by the LDS Church's whitewashing of its origins and history.

"Whitewashing," huh? All right, let's return to the version of history that you remember. Here's one of the pictures you provided that represented your "whitewashed" understanding of how Joseph translated.



Joseph began to translate the writing on the gold plates. Joseph did not know what the writing meant. God helped him. Joseph used the Urim and Thummim to understand the words. We can read what he translated. It is called the Book of Mormon.

Joseph Smith—History 1:62

See? Now THIS makes a lot more sense, what with Joseph wearing a pair of granny spectacles attached to a suit of armor and all. That's how translation is supposed to be done – two rocks and a coat of armor, not one rock and a hat. (This picture, incidentally, accurately represents at least part of how the translation took place.)

Do you see yet just how petty your objection is? From my perspective, this “whitewashed” picture looks far weirder than the rock in the hat. But since this culturally fits your own expectations, it's acceptable to you, but something that uses something more akin to a 19th Century person's cultural expectations is entirely unacceptable. Presentism, thy name is Runnells.

3. Witnesses:

We are told that the witnesses never disavowed their testimonies,

Which is both true and not unimportant. At different points in their lives, all of the Three Witnesses were bitterly opposed to Joseph Smith and could have profited greatly from exposing him as a fraud. They never did, even at great personal cost to their own reputations. David Whitmer never came back and had plenty of nasty things to say about Joseph, yet he never once denied his testimony and reaffirmed it on his deathbed.

but we have not come to know these men or investigated what else they said about their experiences.

We haven't? Who's “we?” People in and out of the Church have scrutinized the Three and Eight Witnesses for the better part of two centuries. Maybe *you* hadn't, but don't

drag “we” into this.

They are 11 individuals: Martin Harris, Oliver Cowdery, Hiram Page, David Whitmer, John Whitmer, Christian Whitmer, Jacob Whitmer, Peter Whitmer Jr., Hyrum Smith, Samuel Smith, and Joseph Smith Sr. – who all shared a common worldview of second sight, magic, and treasure digging – which is what drew them together in 1829.

No, what drew most of them together was that they were related to each other. You keep citing people believing in harmless superstitions as some kind of indictment, but it certainly wouldn't have been seen as such in the early 19th Century, nor was it, as you falsely imply, the defining characteristic of these people's lives.

The following are several facts and observations on several of the Book of Mormon Witnesses

- Martin Harris:

Martin Harris was anything but a skeptical witness.

Martin Harris was a remarkably skeptical witness. He swapped out Joseph's seer stone with another one to test its veracity. The reason we don't have the lost 116 pages is that he begged Joseph to have something tangible to satisfy his wife's skepticism. He undertook an expensive journey to New York to have an academic – Charles Anthon, to be precise – verify the particulars of the translated characters. The record shows that he was constantly looking for external validation of Joseph's claims, which is what skeptical witnesses do.

He was known by many of his peers as an unstable, gullible, and superstitious man.

That reputation befell him largely as a result of his belief in Mormonism. Prior to his acceptance of a religion his neighbors despised, he was a well-respected and wealthy landowner with a stellar reputation. Even after the Mormons got him, a virulent anti-Mormon critic [conceded](#) that “only his [belief in Mormonism] was Martin deemed insane; on other subjects he exhibited all of his former clearness of brain; he could drive a good bargain, and manage his farming matters as well as ever.” Another non-Mormon contemporary of Martin [reported](#) that “There can't anybody say a word against Martin Harris. Martin was a good citizen . . . a man that would do just as he agreed with you.” None of that jibes with a reputation for instability or gullibility.

As for superstition, the 19th Century standard is quite different from today's standard, and anyone willing to hang out with the Mormons probably got tarred with that particular brush. Even after he cast his lot with the Mormons, he had a reputation for honesty. As one critic wrote, “How to reconcile the act of Harris in signing his name to such a statement [i.e. the Testimony of the Three Witnesses], in view of the character of honesty which had always been conceded to him, could never easily be explained.” That comes from our old friend Pomeroy Tucker, who was certainly no fan of Harris or the Church.

In any case, this is all ad hominem nonsense. If it was a fraud, Martin, no matter how unstable, gullible, or superstitious he was, he had plenty of opportunity and motive to come clean. In fact, if he truly was gullible and unstable, it's likely that he would have cracked under pressure, and there was plenty of pressure on him to expose Joseph as a fraud.

Reports assert that he and the other witnesses never literally saw the gold plates, but only an object said to be the plates, covered with a cloth.

Which reports? Because I think there's a big issue of the report published at the beginning of every edition of the Book of Mormon – i.e. the Testimony of the Three Witnesses, of which Harris was one, and its firsthand account directly contradicts such reports in every respect.

Additionally, Martin Harris had a direct conflict of interest in being a witness. He was deeply financially invested in the Book of Mormon as he mortgaged his farm to finance the book.

He lost that farm, too, as I recall. When he was excommunicated and disaffected with Joseph Smith, his financial losses would have given him extra incentive to deny his testimony. Why didn't he?

The following are some accounts that show the superstitious side of Martin Harris:

“Once while reading scripture, he reportedly mistook a candle's sputtering as a sign that the devil desired him to stop. Another time he excitedly awoke from his sleep believing that a creature as large as a dog had been upon his chest, though a nearby associate could find nothing to confirm his fears. Several hostile and **perhaps unreliable** accounts told of visionary experiences with Satan and Christ, Harris once reporting that Christ had been poised on a roof beam.”

– BYU professor Ronald W. Walker, "Martin Harris: Mormonism's Early Convert," p.34-35 [I added some emphasis there for you.]

Please quote the next sentence of Professor Walker's paragraph. “But such talk came easy. His exaggerated sense of the supernatural naturally produced **caricature and tall and sometimes false tales.**” [Emphasis added.]

So much of this information comes from people eager to discredit Martin that it's impossible to sort out what's true and what's nonsense. If the best indictment you can come up with is that once got weirded out by a sputtering candle and he had a bad dream about a dog, I don't think you're making a compelling case that the guy was a loon. I do think he was probably more superstitious than most 21st Century folks, but as we've observed with Joseph and Oliver, that kind of world view actually opened his mind to the possibilities of revelation, so it wasn't necessarily a negative.

“No matter where he went, he saw visions and supernatural appearances all around him. He told a gentleman in Palmyra, after one of his excursions to Pennsylvania, while the translation of the Book of Mormon was going on, that on the way he met the Lord Jesus Christ, who walked along by the side of him in the shape of a deer for two or three miles, talking with him as familiarly as one man talks with another.”

- John A. Clark letter, August 31, 1840 in Early Mormon Documents 2:271

This can also be found in John A. Clark’s book [“Gleanings by the Way.”](#) page 258, a book dedicated to exposing the “Mormon delusion” by highlighting the thoroughly debunked and discredited theory that the Book of Mormon was copied from Solomon Spaulding’s lost manuscript. (Everyone now knows it was copied from View of the Hebrews, the Late War Between the United States and Great Britain, and the First Book of Napoleon, with sprinkles of Captain Kidd, obscure African maps, and names from a 2,000 square mile radius on local maps.)

Clark never met Martin Harris, and there is every reason to believe this second-hand hearsay story is a complete fabrication.

“According to two Ohio newspapers, shortly after Harris arrived in Kirtland he began claiming to have ‘seen Jesus Christ and that he is the handsomest man he ever did see. He has also seen the Devil, whom he described as a very sleek haired fellow with four feet, and a head like that of a Jack-ass.’”

— Early Mormon Documents 2:271, note 32.

Another unreliable John Clark hearsay fable. Next.

Before Harris became a Mormon, he had already [changed his religion](#) at least five times.

False. Your link takes us to the Wikipedia article about Martin Harris, which sources this bogus assertion by referencing the Dialogue Article “Martin Harris, Mormonism’s Early Convert,” pp. 30-33. You can read the actual article [online](#). Nowhere in pages 30-33 of this article – or anywhere else in the article, for that matter – does Ronald Walker make this claim. Richard L. Anderson, however, has [this to say](#) about the subject.

“The arithmetic of Martin's five religious changes before Mormonism is also faulty. The claim comes from the hostile Palmyra affidavits published by E. D. Howe; G. W. Stoddard closed his in sarcasm against Martin Harris: "He as first an orthodox Quaker, then a Universalist, next a Restorationer, then a Baptist, next a Presbyterian, and then a Mormon." Palmyra sources do not yet prove that Martin was a Quaker, though his wife probably was. And no evidence yet associates Martin with the Baptist or Presbyterian churches. Note that the other two names are religious positions, not necessarily churches--philosophical Universalists dissent from traditional churches in believing that God will save all, and Restorationists obviously take literally the many Bible prophecies of God's reestablished work in modern times. An early Episcopal minister in Palmyra interviewed Martin and reduced his five positions to two: "He had been, if I mistake not, at one period a member of the Methodist Church, and subsequently had identified himself with the Universalists." Of course Martin could have been a Universalist and

Restorationer simultaneously. ([Anderson 1981, 168-169](#))

After Joseph's death, Harris continued this earlier pattern by joining and leaving 5 more different sects, including James Strang (whom Harris went on a mission to England for), other Mormon offshoots, and the Shakers.

The Strangs actually pulled Martin out of the Strangite mission field, because his only interest was in the Book of Mormon, not Strang. As soon as he was yanked off of Strangite missionary duty, Harris abandoned and repudiated the Strangites. His repeated affiliations with splinter groups demonstrates an eagerness to cling to the testimony of the Book of Mormon, which never wavered. Since he refused to accept plural marriage and the authority of the mainstream Church, he was clearly seeking some way to stay true to his testimony when he could not stay true to Joseph. His flirtation with the Shakers didn't last long, and he eventually found his way back to full fellowship with the Saints, where he remained for the rest of his life.

Again, all of this is ad hominem hooey that doesn't erase Martin Harris's consistent and credible witness for the Book of Mormon.

Not only did Harris join other religions, he testified and witnessed for them.

No, he testified and witnessed for the Book of Mormon, using splinter groups as the vehicle to do so. The splinter groups grew impatient with the fact that this was the only thing Harris really wanted to discuss, which is why he fell out with them so quickly.

It has been reported that Martin Harris "declared repeatedly that he had as much evidence for a Shaker book he had as for the Book of Mormon" (The Braden and Kelly Debate, p.173).

The Braden and Kelley debate took place thirteen years after Martin Harris's death, and this is the first time anyone made such a charge. The person making the charge had never met Harris and had no way to substantiate this allegation, and, furthermore, neither do you.

In addition to devotion to self-proclaimed prophet James Strang, Martin Harris was a follower to another self-proclaimed Mormon prophet by the name of Gladden Bishop. Like Strang, Bishop claimed to have plates, Urim and Thummim, and that he was receiving revelation from the Lord. Martin was one of Gladden Bishop's witnesses to his claims.

A gross exaggeration. Martin never gave any witness that Gladden Bishop actually had any plates or a Urim and Thummim or anything else. His testimony in this splinter group, as in all the splinter groups he joined, was focused on the Book of Mormon and his original witness.

If someone testified of some strange spiritual encounter he had, but he also told you that he...

conversed with Jesus who took the form of a deer

As noted above, it's highly unlikely Martin ever said this.

saw the devil with his four feet and donkey head

—

Martin almost certainly didn't say this, either.

chipped off a chunk of a stone box that would mysteriously move beneath the ground to avoid capture

First time you've mentioned this one. Source, please?

interpreted simple things like a flickering of a candle as a sign of the devil

Hearsay and dubious, but harmless even if it's accurate.

had a creature appearing on his chest that no one else could see

More like woke up from a bad dream. (Also dubious hearsay.)

...would you believe his claims? Or would you call the nearest mental hospital?

I'd do neither. Instead, I'd verify my sources for these claims, as all of them are either grossly exaggerated or altogether bogus.

With inconsistency, conflict of interest, magical thinking, and superstition like this, exactly what credibility does Martin Harris have and why should I believe him?

With all the faults and statements that you falsely attribute to him, all the while ignoring the voluminous evidence that Harris was a well-respected man known for his honesty and good character, no one would believe the testimony of such a caricature, because the straw man you've created bears little or no resemblance to the actual Martin Harris.

David Whitmer:

David claimed in early June 1829 before their group declaration that he, Cowdery, and Joseph Smith observed "one of the Nephites" carrying the records in a knapsack on his way to Cumorah. Several days later this trio perceived "that the Same Person was under the shed" at the Whitmer farm. – An Insider's View of Mormon Origins, p.179

I can find no 1829 version of this story. Dan Vogel [reports](#) that Whitmer told this story "with varying detail" beginning in 1877, almost 50 years after the fact. So many of the statements you rely on to discredit David Whitmer come from a time when he was severely disaffected with Joseph, and that disaffection coupled with advanced age makes it difficult to sort out what's reliable and what's not.

In 1880, David Whitmer was asked for a description of the angel who showed him the plates. Whitmer responded that the angel "had no appearance or shape." When asked by the interviewer how he then could bear testimony that he had seen and heard an angel, Whitmer replied, "Have you never had impressions?" To which the interviewer responded, "Then you had impressions as the Quaker when the spirit moves, or as a good Methodist in giving a happy experience, a feeling?" "Just so," replied Whitmer. – Interview with John Murphy, June 1880, EMD 5:63

Nice try. Whitmer himself quickly issued a statement to directly refute this account of the story immediately after it was published.

A young Mormon lawyer, James Henry Moyle, who interviewed Whitmer in 1885, asked if there was any possibility that Whitmer had been deceived. "His answer was unequivocal...that he saw the plates and heard the angel with unmistakable clearness." But Moyle went away "not fully satisfied...It was more spiritual than I anticipated." – Moyle diary, June 28, 1885, EMD 5:141

Well, good for Moyle. Sounds like it's more Moyle's problem than Whitmer's. In multiple interviews, Whitmer repeatedly made it clear that this was far more than just a spiritual impression. Orson Pratt recounts an interview with Whitmer where he specified all the things he saw "just as plain as I see this bed (striking his hand upon the bed beside him)." Moyle himself describes later conversations with Whitmer that provide a distinct physical context for the angels' appearance.

"He said that they (Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer and Martin Harris) were out in the primitive woods in Western New York; that there was nothing between them and the Angel except a log that had fallen in the forest; that it was broad daylight with nothing to prevent either hearing or seeing all that took place...he did see and hear the Angel and heard the declaration that the plates had been correctly translated; that there was absolutely nothing to prevent his having a full, clear view of it all. I remember very distinctly asking him if there was anything unnatural or unusual about the surroundings or the atmosphere. He answered that question. I do not remember exactly the words he used, but he indicated that there was something of a haze or peculiarity about the atmosphere that surrounded them but nothing that would prevent his having a clear vision and knowledge of all that took place. He declared to me that the testimony which he published to the world was true and that he had never denied any part of it." (James Henry Moyle, statement, 13 September 1938; in Dan Vogel (editor), *Early Mormon Documents* (Salt Lake City, Signature Books, 1996–2003), 5 vols, 5:146-147.)

The idea seems to be that Moyle wanted some kind of concrete description of the "haze or peculiarity" and was unsatisfied when Whitmer couldn't directly explain the spiritual element of the vision in more mundane, down-to-earth terms. Both Moyle and Whitmer would be surprised to see this exchange used to support a contention that Whitmer didn't actually see the plates or the angel.

Whitmer's testimony also included the following:

“If you believe my testimony to the Book of Mormon; if you believe that God spake to us three witnesses by his own voice, then I tell you that in June, 1838, God spake to me again by his own voice from the heavens and told me to 'separate myself from among the Latter Day Saints, for as they sought to do unto me, so it should be done unto them.'”
– David Whitmer, An Address to All Believers in Christ (promoting his Whitmerite sect)

If David Whitmer is a credible witness, why are we only using his testimony of the Book of Mormon while ignoring his other testimony claiming that God Himself spoke to Whitmer “by his own voice from the heavens” in June 1838 commanding Whitmer to apostatize from the Lord’s one and only true Church?

In June, 1838, David Whitmer had already been excommunicated from the Church for two months. The voice from God, therefore, wasn’t telling him to “apostatize from the Lord’s one and only true Church,” as he was already in a state of apostasy when the voice from heaven reportedly spoke to him. Apostasy tends to warp one’s spiritual perceptions and access to heaven.

Oliver Cowdery:

Like Joseph and most of the Book of Mormon witnesses, Oliver Cowdery and his family were treasure hunters.

What does that mean? Were they riding around on Captain Kidd’s pirate ship? By profession, Joseph Smith and his family were farmers, and Oliver Cowdery was a schoolteacher. There is no record of Oliver Cowdery engaging in treasure hunting, either professionally or as an amateur treasure hunting hobbyist.

Oliver’s preferred tool of trade, as mentioned above, was the divining rod.

And there is no record of what he did with that divining rod. Most people who used such rods used them to try to find water to dig wells, not find buried treasure.

He was known as a “rodsman.”

He was? You put the word in quotes - can you therefore give me a contemporary firsthand source that labeled him as such? Because he was actually known as a “schoolteacher.” And, later, a “lawyer.” Although “lawyer” is arguably a far more pejorative term than “rodsman.”

Along with the witnesses, Oliver held a magical mindset.

Meaning what? You offer this arbitrary label as if it’s self-explanatory and it somehow disqualifies Oliver from being a serious person. Oliver was quite accomplished, both in and out of the Church, and he was also highly respected, both in and out of the Church, and his career demonstrates that he was a rather practical man, not some wannabe wizard, as you seem to be implying.

Oliver Cowdery was not an objective and independent witness. As scribe for the Book of Mormon, co-founder of the Church, and cousin to Joseph Smith, there was a serious conflict of interest in Oliver being a witness.

Conflict of interest? As a scribe who experienced the translation process firsthand, he was already a witness by default. This is like saying Joseph had a “conflict of interest” by testifying of what he knew, which is sort of ridiculous. Oliver and Joseph were both interested in the Book of Mormon – what’s the interest that conflicts with that?

“Conflict of interest” is a term used to describe people who, say, stand to gain private financial rewards for their action in official public capacities, or lawyers who represent or influence clients on opposite sides of a dispute. Oliver had no official capacity as an elected official or lawyer that would conflict with his being a witness, so you’re misapplying the term here. To paraphrase Inigo Montoya, you keep using that phrase, but I do not think it means what you think it means.

You also seem to define “objective and independent” as “someone who thinks Joseph Smith was a fraud.”

4. Second Sight:

People believed they could see things as a vision in their mind. They called it “second sight.”

Which people?

We call it “imagination.”

We do? Are you including me in this?

It made no difference to these people if they saw with their natural eyes or their spiritual eyes as they both were one and the same.

So, in other words, some people, presumably 19th Century people based on your context, couldn’t distinguish between reality and imagination, the way *we* can. Quite a nice little straw man you’ve built there. Really helps with the condescension process.

As mentioned previously, people believed they could see spirits and their dwelling places in the local hills along with seeing buried treasure deep in the ground. This supernatural way of seeing the world is also referred in Doctrine & Covenants as “the eyes of our understanding.”

“The veil was taken from our minds, and the eyes of our understanding were opened. We saw the Lord standing upon the breastwork of the pulpit, before us; and under his feet was a paved work of pure gold, in color like amber.”

That’s the verse you link to to show that the phrase “the eyes of our understanding” has

reference to visions of “buried treasure deep in the ground?” They’re talking about something happening right in front of them (“[he was] standing upon the breastwork of the [Kirtland Temple] pulpit, before us) not underground treasure miles away.

There is absolutely no support in the actual text of D&C 110 for your bizarre interpretation of this phrase.

If the plates and the experiences were real and tangible as 21st century Mormons are led to believe, why would the witnesses make the following kind of statements when describing the plates and the experience:

“While praying I passed into a state of entrancement, and in that state I saw the angel and the plates.” – EMD 2:346-47

“I never saw the gold plates, only in a visionary or entranced state.” – EMD 2:346-47

They wouldn’t. Those two statements are part of a single quote attributed to Martin Harris after his death by Anthony Metcalf, who referred to Joseph Smith as a “pretend prophet” and was trying to discredit the Church. They contradict everything Martin Harris had to say firsthand about the experience, and it is extraordinarily unlikely that Harris would suddenly change his story so radically when being interviewed by an antagonistic critic.

Martin Harris, in the last years of his life, had this to say:

“The Prophet Joseph Smith, and Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer and myself, went into a little grove to pray to obtain a promise that we should behold it with our **eyes natural eyes**, that we could testify of it to the world” (EMD 2:375). [Emphasis added, strikethrough in original.] Deliberate use of the phrase “natural eyes” is in direct contradiction to your straw-man premise of “second sight” or “eyes of our understanding.”

Or how about this one:

“Gentlemen, do you see that hand? Are you sure you see it? Are your eyes playing a trick or something? No. Well, as sure as you see my hand so sure did I see the angel and the plates.” (Richard Lloyd Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1981), 116)

Why do you ignore everything Martin Harris actually said and instead take the word of a hostile critic citing posthumous hearsay at face value?

“He only saw the plates with a spiritual eye” – Joseph Smith Begins His Work, Vol. 1, 1958

More posthumous hearsay from a hostile critic of the Church written in 1892, seventeen years after Martin’s death and at least sixty years after this likely-bogus confession

allegedly took place.

“As shown in the vision” – Zenas H. Gurley, Jr., Interview with David Whitmer on January 14, 1885

You’re splitting hairs here. Describing a visit from an angel as a “vision” does not preclude that it was a literal experience. We refer to Joseph Smith’s “First Vision,” but we do not deny that the Father and the Son were physically present for the experience with that description.

“Never saw the plates with his natural eyes but only in vision or imagination”
– Letter from Stephen Burnett to "Br. Johnson," April 15, 1838, in Joseph Smith Letter Book, p. 2

Another hearsay statement from a bitter ex-Mormon. He claims Martin and the other witnesses admitted this in public, which is extraordinarily curious, as such a damning admission would no doubt have prompted a wave of apostasy and a great deal of consternation that would surely have made its way into someone else’s journal. As it stands, without any shred of corroborating evidence that Martin made such a public statement, there’s every reason to believe that Burnett is making this up.

“They were shown to me by a supernatural power”
– [History of the Church Vol. 3, Ch. 21, p. 307-308](#)

Yes. An angel.

Also, your link here is broken. I don’t know who supposedly said this or if the statement is reliable.

“...when I came to hear Martin Harris state in public that he never saw the plates with his natural eyes only in vision or imagination, neither Oliver nor David & also that the eight witnesses never saw them & hesitated to sign that instrument for that reason, but were persuaded to do it, the last pedestal gave way, in my view our foundation was sapped & the entire superstructure fell in heap of ruins, I therefore three week since in the Stone Chapel...renounced the Book of Mormon...after we were done speaking M Harris arose & said he was sorry for any man who rejected the Book of Mormon for he knew it was true, he said he had hefted the plates repeatedly in a box with only a tablecloth or a handkerchief over them, but he never saw them only as he saw a city throught [sic] a mountain. And said that he never should have told that the testimony of the eight was false, if it had not been picked out of——[him/me?] but should have let it passed as it was...”

– Letter from Stephen Burnett to "Br. Johnson," April 15, 1838, in Joseph Smith Letter Book, p. 2

Oh, so you do have a second witness about Martin Harris’s daring public admission of fraud.

No, wait – this is exactly the same unreliable guy you quoted two sentences earlier. In fact, *this is exactly the same quote*. Is your case so flimsy that you have to dress up the same quote twice to give the illusion that Martin had more detractors than he actually had?

The foreman in the Palmyra printing office that produced the first Book of Mormon said that Harris “used to practice a good deal of his characteristic jargon and ‘seeing with the spiritual eye,’ and the like.” – Mormonism: Its Origin, Rise, and Progress, p.71

And you did it again! This is just another excerpt from John Gilbert’s hostile 1892, 17-years-after-Martins-death, over-six-decades-after-the-conversation-took-place account that you quoted five quotes earlier. Why only quote the same statement from Gilbert twice? Why not break this into three quotes to give an even greater illusion of credibility?

Two other Palmyra residents said that Harris told them that he had seen the plates with “the eye of faith” or “spiritual eyes” – EMD 2:270 and 3:22

The first comes from John A. Clark, the same guy who made up the stuff about Martin talking to Jesus as a deer. Clark’s claim to fame is his lengthy treatise “proving” that the Book of Mormon was lifted from the Spaulding manuscript, a theory which has since been thoroughly debunked and has been rejected by critics as well as supporters, except for a handful of people like Vernal Holley, who provided your bogus Book of Mormon geography maps. The second comes from a Presbyterian pastor who was hostile to the Church, and it comes with an admission that it is hearsay that came to him by way of gossip – the pastor never heard Martin say “spiritual eyes,” as Martin had left Palmyra before any such supposed confession took place.

John H. Gilbert, the typesetter for most of the Book of Mormon, said that he had asked Harris, “Martin, did you see those plates with your naked eyes?” According to Gilbert, Harris “looked down for an instant, raised his eyes up, and said, ‘No, I saw them with a spiritual eye.’” – EMD 2:548

And there it is! Ladies and gentlemen, we have a John Gilbert trifecta! You quote the same guy three times from the same document as if you have amassed three separate statements against Martin Harris’s testimony! In other words, you say we ought to reject Martin Harris based on the statements of five different witnesses: Stephen Burnett, Stephen Burnett, John Gilbert, John Gilbert, and John Gilbert.

Honestly, Jeremy, this is extraordinarily sloppy and misleading “scholarship” on your part.

If these witnesses literally really saw the plates like everyone else on the planet sees tangible objects...why strange statements like, “I never saw them only as I see a city through a mountain”? What does that even mean?

It means Stephen Burnett made it up.

I've never seen a city through a mountain. Have you?

No, but I've seen you pretend that one guy is actually three different guys.

Why all these bizarre statements from the witnesses if the plates were real and the event literal?

There are at least three fewer bizarre statements than you claim there to be, and the three that remain are demonstrably fraudulent and contradict the over 60 firsthand statements from the actual witnesses themselves that you choose to ignore.

Why would you need a vision or supernatural power to see real, physical plates that Joseph said were in a box that he carried around?

You wouldn't. That's why the Eight Witnesses describe the utterly mundane experience of having "seen and hefted" the plates, minus any supernatural power. The testimony of the Three Witnesses, however, includes more than just a physical interaction with sheets of metal – it includes a visit from an angel, which is a supernatural experience by definition.

When Martin Harris was asked, "But did you see them [plates] with your natural, your bodily eyes, just as you see this pencil-case in my hand? Now say no or yes to this." Martin answered, "I did not see them as I do that pencil-case, yet I saw them with the eye of faith; I saw them just as distinctly as I see anything around me, though at the time they were covered over with a cloth."

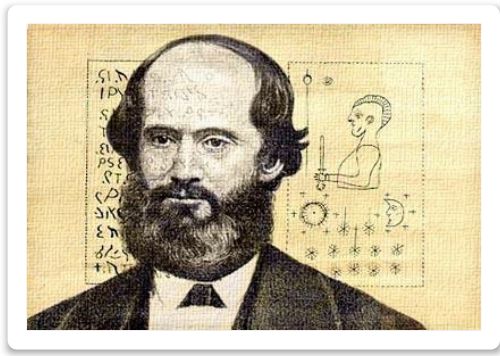
– Origin and History of the Mormonites, p. 406

Why couldn't Martin just simply answer "yes"?

Because this whole conversation never took place. This is John Clark that you're re-quoting, the discredited Spaulding guy. So now we're up to seven distinct witnesses against Martin – Stephen Burnett, Stephen Burnett, John Gilbert, John Gilbert, John Gilbert, John A. Clark, and John A. Clark. All three of the seven are bogus.

Many of the 11 Witnesses may have had the same last name, but at least none of them were the same person.

1. James Strang and the Voree Plates Witnesses:



This should be good for a laugh.

James Strang and his claims are absolutely fascinating.

If you're fascinated by pale imitations and weak retreads.

He was basically Joseph Smith 2.0 - but with a twist.

And the twist is – Strang's church went nowhere and now has less than 300 followers.

Like Joseph, Strang did the following:

- Claimed that he was visited by an angel who reserved plates for him to translate into the word of God. "The record which was sealed from my servant Joseph. Unto thee it is reserved."

And unlike Joseph, Strang had no other witnesses to this angel or to any of his revelations.

- Received the "Urim and Thummim."

And unlike Joseph, nobody else ever saw his Urim and/or Thummim.

- Produced 11 witnesses who testified that they too had seen and inspected ancient metal plates.

And unlike Joseph, there was nothing remotely supernatural about the experience. 11 people watched Strang dig up eighteen paper-sized plates that had likely been buried there by Strang the night before.

- Introduced new scripture. After unearthing the plates (the same plates as Laban from whom Nephi took the brass plates in Jerusalem), Strang translated it into scripture called the "[Book of the Law of the Lord](#)."

And unlike Joseph, who translated a 265,000 complex, internally consistent 1,000-year history in sixty days despite being functionally illiterate, the well-educated Strang took a decade to produce a book about a fifth as long with no coherent narrative.

- Established a new Church: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Strangite). Its headquarters is still in Voree, Wisconsin.

And unlike Joseph, Strang's church dwindled to the point where it had ["had around three hundred members in 1998."](#)

- Like the Book of Mormon, the Book of the Law of the Lord has the testimony of its Witnesses in its preface:

TESTIMONY

Be it known unto all nations, kindreds, tongues and people, to whom this Book of the Law of the Lord shall come, that James J. Strang has the plates of the ancient Book of the Law of the Lord given to Moses, from which he translated this law, and has shown them to us. We examined them with our eyes, and handled them with our hands. The engravings are beautiful antique workmanship, bearing a striking resemblance to the ancient oriental languages; and those from which the laws in this book were translated are eighteen in number, about seven inches and three-eighths wide, by nine inches long, occasionally embellished with beautiful pictures.

And we testify unto you all that the everlasting kingdom of God is established, in which this law shall be kept, till it brings in rest and everlasting righteousness to all the faithful.

SAMUEL GRAHAM, SAMUEL P. BACON, WARREN POST, PHINEAS WRIGHT,
ALBERT N. HOSMER, EBENEZER PAGE, JEHIEL SAVAGE.

And unlike Joseph, none of these witnesses report any supernatural or even spiritual experience or event. These plates were on public display until the turn of the century – plenty of other people saw them, too. They were not in any identifiable language, and they rival the Kinderhook plates for evidence of authenticity, or lack thereof.

In addition to the above 7 witnesses, there were 4 witnesses who went with Strang as they unearthed the Voree Plates:

TESTIMONY OF WITNESSES TO THE VOREE PLATES

1. On the thirteenth day of September, 1845, we, Aaron Smith, Jirah B. Wheelan, James M. Van Nostrand, and Edward Whitcomb, assembled at the call of James J. Strang, who is by us and many others approved as a Prophet and Seer of God. He proceeded to inform us that it had been revealed to him in a vision that an account of an ancient people was buried in a hill south of White River bridge, near the east line of Walworth County; and leading us to an oak tree about one foot in diameter, told us that we would find it enclosed in a case of rude earthen ware under that tree at the depth of about three feet; requested us to dig it up, and charged us to so examine the ground that we should know we were not imposed upon, and that it had not been buried there since the tree grew. The

tree was surrounded by a sward of deeply rooted grass, such as is usually found in the openings, and upon the most critical examination we could not discover any indication that it had ever been cut through or disturbed.

2. We then dug up the tree, and continued to dig to the depth of about three feet, where we found a case of slightly baked clay containing three plates of brass. On one side of one is a landscape view of the south end of Gardner's prairie and the range of hills where they were dug. On another is a man with a crown on his head and a scepter in his hand, above is an eye before an upright line, below the sun and moon surrounded with twelve stars, at the bottom are twelve large stars from three of which pillars arise, and closely interspersed with them are seventy very small stars. The other four sides are very closely covered with what appear to be alphabetic characters, but in a language of which we have no knowledge.

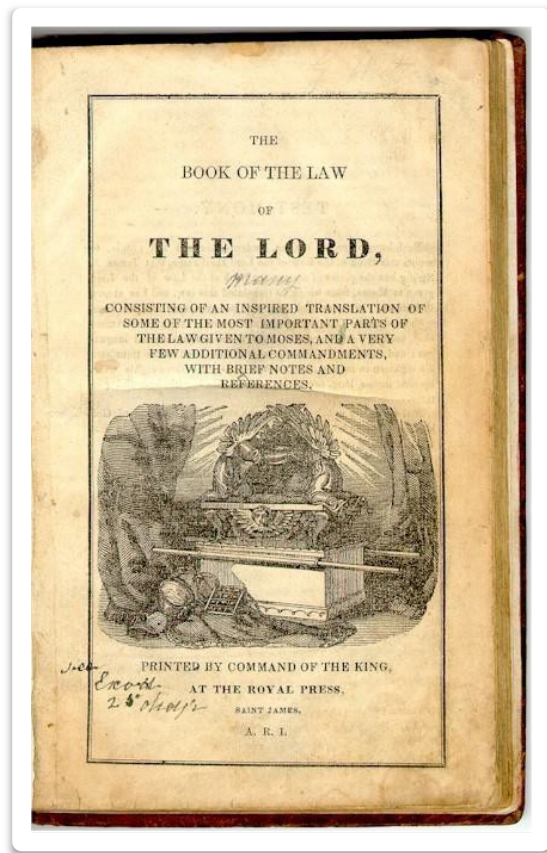
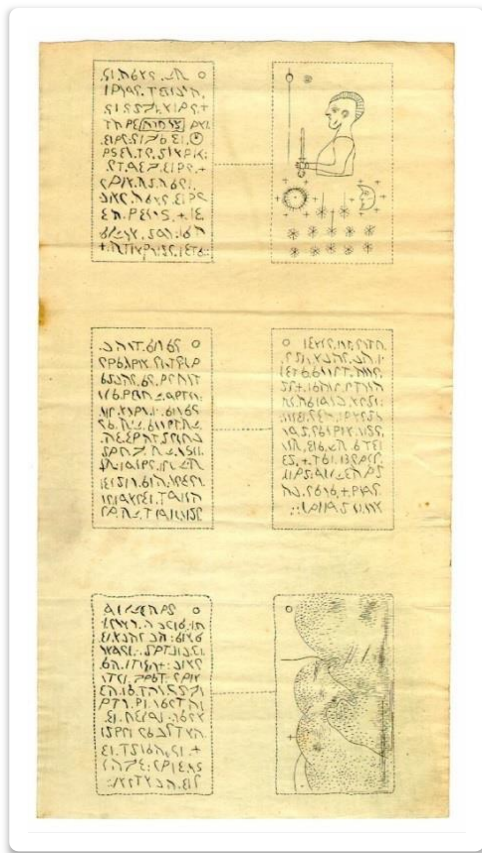
3. The case was found imbedded in indurated clay so closely fitting it that it broke in taking out, and the earth below the soil was so hard as to be dug with difficulty even with a pickax. Over the case was found a flat stone about one foot wide each way and three inches thick, which appeared to have undergone the action of fire, and fell in pieces after a few minutes exposure to the air. The digging extended in the clay about eighteen inches, there being two kinds of earth of different color and appearance above it.

4. We examined as we dug all the way with the utmost care, and we say, with utmost confidence, that no part of the earth through which we dug exhibited any sign or indication that it had been moved or disturbed at any time previous. The roots of the tree stuck down on every side very closely, extending below the case, and closely interwoven with roots from other trees. None of them had been broken or cut away. No clay is found in the country like that of which the case is made.

5. In fine, we found an alphabetic and pictorial record, carefully cased up, buried deep in the earth, covered with a flat stone, with an oak tree one foot in diameter growing over it, with every evidence that the sense can give that it has lain there as long as that tree has been growing. Strang took no part in the digging, but kept entirely away from before the first blow was struck till after the plates were taken out of the case; and the sole inducement to our digging was our faith in his statement as a Prophet of the Lord that a record would thus and there be found.

AARON SMITH, JIRAH B. WHEELAN,
J. M. VAN NOSTRAND, EDWARD WHITCOMB.

And, again, unlike Joseph, there's nothing supernatural or even spiritual in this testimony. There's also absolutely no reason to doubt it or renounce it. I'm pretty sure these guys actually did dig up the plates Strang had buried the night before.



And there they are. Very cool. Now you're a witness, too!

Like Joseph, Strang had a scribe (Samuel Graham) who wrote as Strang translated.

And unlike Joseph, Strang, who was well-educated, didn't actually need one. His use of a scribe was just one more way to imitate Joseph.

Along with several of the witnesses, Graham was later excommunicated from Strang's Church. There is no **direct evidence** that any of the above 11 Strang witnesses ever denied their testimony of James Strang, the Voree Plates, Strang's church or Strang's divine calling.

I added some emphasis there to highlight your hypocrisy on this point. Because every piece of hearsay that could possibly prove embarrassing to Martin Harris is cited by you as unimpeachable gospel even if it comes from conversations that took place decades after the fact and after Harris was dead, but the contemporaneous hearsay that had two of the witnesses denouncing Strang as a fraud and one of them admitting he helped Strang forge the plates is only indirect evidence, so you can conveniently ignore it.

You have to be consistent. If you believe the hearsay that says Martin Harris talked to a deer he thought was Jesus, you also have to believe the hearsay that said the witnesses helped forge these bogus plates.

As for denying this testimony, what's to deny? They dug up the homemade plates that Strang had buried the night before. I have no reason to doubt it, because it's a mundane, everyday sort of event. Similarly, when I was twelve years old, someone put a dead fish in my tent at Boy Scout camp. I've never denied my testimony of that event, and I never will.

Every single living Book of Mormon witness besides Oliver Cowdery accepted Strang's prophetic claim of being Joseph's true successor and joined him and his church.

Which is very peculiar if they actually knew Joseph Smith was fraud. Why seek out a successor to a bogus prophet after the bogus prophet dies? Their interest in perpetuating the cause of the Book of Mormon demonstrates that their belief in it was wholly sincere.

Also, it's not true. Only two of the Eight Witnesses followed Strang – Hiram Page and John Whitmer. In any case, they were all quickly disillusioned and abandoned Strang completely.

Additionally, every single member of Joseph Smith's family except for Hyrum's widow also endorsed, joined, and sustained James Strang as "Prophet, Seer, and Revelator."

And then walked away after they realized he wasn't what he claimed to be.

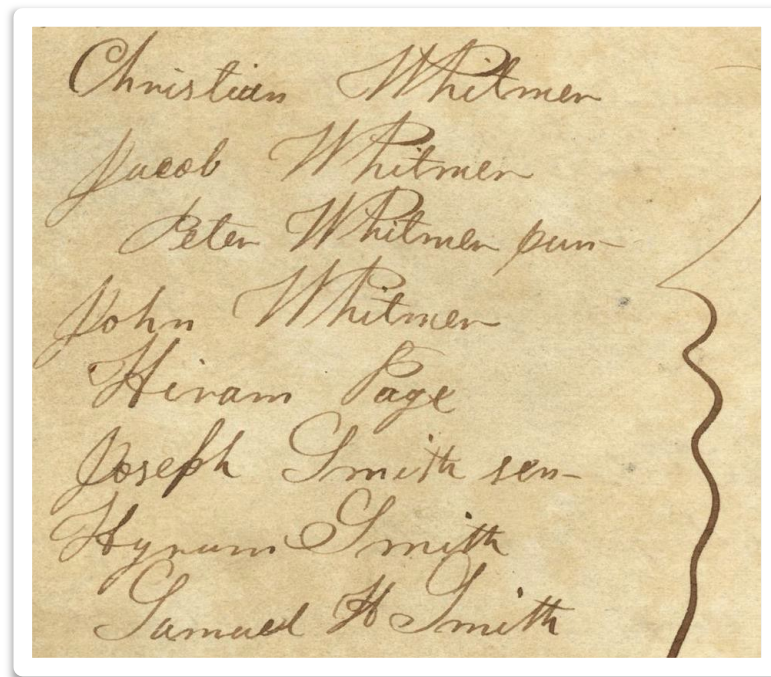
What does this say about the credibility of the Book of Mormon witnesses if they were so easily duped by James Strang and his claims of being a prophet called of God to bring forth new scripture from ancient plates only to later turn out to be a fraud?

It says they still believed in Joseph's prophetic mission and the veracity of the Book of Mormon and were eager to find the appropriate spiritual home for their testimony, and that, after making the mistake of thinking that Strang could provide that home, quickly corrected course.

6. No Document of Actual Signatures:

The closest thing we have in existence to an original document of the testimonies of the witnesses is a printer's manuscript written by Oliver Cowdery. Every witness name except Oliver Cowdery on that document is not signed; they are written in Oliver's own handwriting. Further, there is no testimony from any of the witnesses, with the exception of David Whitmer, directly attesting to the direct wording and claims of the manuscript or statements in the Book of Mormon.

Which means what, exactly? Every witness repeatedly reaffirmed their testimonies throughout their lives in a variety of settings. The statement was not a legal document, so no signatures were necessary. Certainly there's no record of any witness disputing any details of the statement.



And isn't Oliver's penmanship lovely?

While we have "testimonies" from the witnesses recorded in later years through interviews and second eyewitness accounts and affidavits, many of the "testimonies" given by some of the witnesses do not match the claims and wording of the statements in the Book of Mormon.

Not true at all. What, now you're just going to re-quote the same three/seven hearsay guys again?

For example:

Testimony of Three Witnesses (which includes Martin Harris) states:

"...that we beheld and saw the plates, and the engravings thereon;"

Martin Harris:

"...he said he had hefted the plates repeatedly in a box with only a tablecloth or a handkerchief over them, but he never saw them..."

– Letter from Stephen Burnett to "Br. Johnson," April 15, 1838, in Joseph Smith Letter Book, p. 2

Yep, that's exactly what you're going to do. Thank you for providing citation for this bogus

hearsay quote the third time you cite it, as someone may have missed it the first two times around. Dude, this is getting ridiculous.

“I did not see them as I do that pencil-case, yet I saw them with the eye of faith; I saw them just as distinctly as I see anything around me, though at the time they were covered over with a cloth.”
– Origin and History of the Mormonites, p. 406

Third time’s a charm, I guess. Do you think re-citing this same handful of tired hearsay quotes, which contradict dozens of reliable firsthand accounts, somehow makes them truer?

There is a difference between saying you “beheld and saw the plates and the engravings thereon” and saying you “hefted the plates repeatedly in a box with only a tablecloth or a handkerchief over them” or that the plates “were covered over with a cloth” and that you “saw them with a spiritual eye.”

But there is no difference between this argument now and when you first made it several paragraphs up, or the second or third time you made it. (That “spiritual eye” bit has made it into your letter four times now.) The quotes you provide are still bogus and are vastly outnumbered by more reliable sources that directly contradict them.

When I was a missionary, my understanding and impression from looking at the testimony of the Three and Eight Witnesses in the Book of Mormon was that the statements were legally binding documents in which the names represented signatures on the original document similar to what you would see on the original US Declaration of Independence.

It was? Why? It certainly wasn’t my impression, and it certainly isn’t anything that is taught by the Church. Why or how would these testimonies serve any binding legal purpose? These weren’t affidavits; they weren’t notarized. Nobody was going to introduce this stuff into a court of law. It’s your weird assumption here that’s the problem, not the testimony.

In any case, the Witnesses claimed that they did sign the original manuscript, most of which was destroyed via water damage. Only about 25% of it survives, so, yes, the original document was lost. That’s bad news if any of these witnesses needs to use the original to apply for a loan or something, but it has no bearing on the veracity of their testimony whatsoever.

This is how I presented the testimonies to investigators.

Then, no offense, but you were kind of a weird missionary who was off on his own program. No reference to the witnesses was found in the six discussions I taught, and I’ve since reviewed “Preach My Gospel,” which is the current lesson plan, and it, too, makes no mention of the witnesses, let alone the supposedly legally binding nature of the document they signed.

According to the above manuscript that Oliver took to the printer for the Book of Mormon, they were not signatures.

And nobody has ever made any attempt to pretend that they were.

Since there is no evidence of any document whatsoever with the signatures of all of the witnesses, the only real testimonies we have from the witnesses are later interviews given by them and eyewitness accounts/affidavits made by others, some of which are shown previously.

And previously and previously and previously. (And previously.) But the only one which are shown three and four times previously in the CES letter are the small handful of dubious hearsay docs that contradict the voluminous firsthand accounts that you ignore because they support the witness statement.

From a legal perspective, the statements of the testimonies of the Three and Eight witnesses hold no credibility or weight in a court of law as there are a) no signatures of any of the witnesses except Oliver, b) no specific dates, c) no specific locations,

Good thing they were never intended to be presented in a court of law, then.

And, by the way, when I present the CES Letter to investigators, I do so having been under the impression that it is a legally binding document in which your name represented a signature on the original document similar to what you would see on the original [US Declaration of Independence](#). Yet I can find no signature of yours, no evidence that it was ever notarized, no specific date or location. Your letter would never have any credibility or weight in a court of law. Can we therefore assume that the whole thing is nonsense?

and d) some of the witnesses made statements after the fact that contradict and cast doubt on the specific claims made in the statements contained in the preface of the Book of Mormon.

And previously. (Previously.) You have precisely three such statements, all unreliable hearsay, that you have previously presented multiple times. Previously.

7. Conclusion:

1. “The Witnesses never recanted or denied their testimonies”:

Neither did James Strang’s witnesses; even after they were excommunicated from the church and estranged from Strang.

That’s because they had nothing to recant. They really did see the fake plates they dug up, just as a bunch of people saw the fake Kinderhook plates. The people who saw the Kinderhook plates have never recanted the fact that they saw them, just as I have never recanted my fish-in-a-tent story.

Neither did dozens of Joseph Smith’s neighbors and peers who swore and signed affidavits on Joseph and his family’s characters.

Were any of them asked to recant? Were any of them challenged on the veracity of their statements, or persecuted or ridiculed for making such statements? Maybe some of them thought

better of their positions later on and changed their mind, but we'll never know, because as far as the record goes, they were never given any formal opportunity to recant.

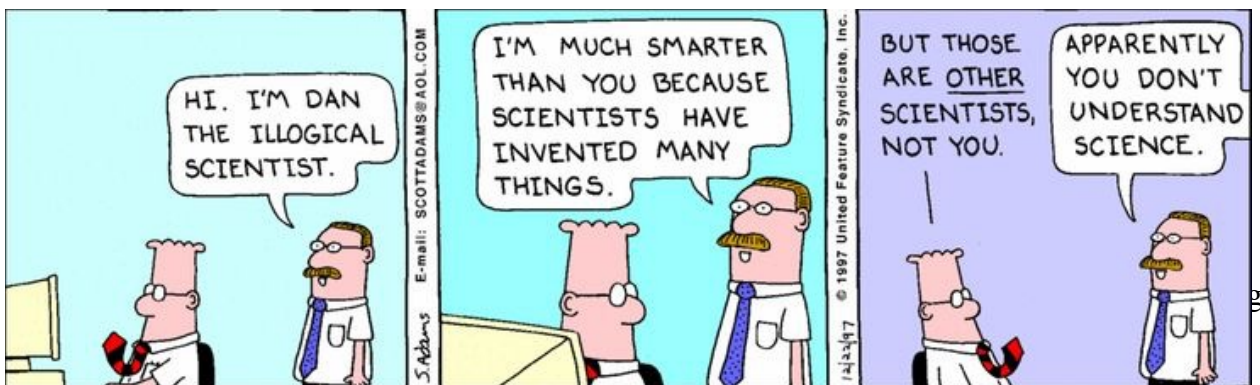
Neither did many of the Shaker witnesses who signed affidavits that they saw an angel on the rooftop holding the "Sacred Roll and Book" written by founder Ann Lee. Same goes with the thousands of people over the centuries who claimed their entire lives to have seen the Virgin Mary and pointing to their experience as evidence that Catholicism is true.

There are also thousands of witnesses who never recanted their testimonies of seeing UFO's, Big Foot, the Loch Ness Monster, Abominable Snowman, Aliens, and so on

It doesn't mean anything. People can believe in false things their entire lives and never recant. Just because they never denied or recanted does not follow that their experience and claims are true or that reality matches to what their perceived experience was.

The logical conclusion to this principle is that no witness on any subject can ever be believed, because there have been lots of false witnesses who have borne testimony of ridiculous things. If we apply this warped logic to the CES Letter, we have to throw out everything you say, because people have written letters about religious topics that have later proven to be incorrect.

You and Dan the Illogical Scientist should hang out and swap stories.



For the record, I served my mission in Scotland and visited Loch Ness several times. Each time, there was a guy in a kilt standing in front of Urquhart Castle who made a living telling tall Nessie tales for tips, and the stories were different with every visit. (I think he was drunk.) Furthermore, none of his stories were signed or notarized, which would get them thrown out in a court of law.

2. Problems:

In discussing the witnesses, we should not overlook the primary accounts of the events they testified to. The official statements published in the Book of Mormon are not dated, signed (we have no record with their signatures except for Oliver's), nor is a specific location given for where the events occurred. These are not eleven legally sworn affidavits but rather simple statements pre-written by Joseph Smith with claims of having been signed by three men and another by eight.

I'm sorry, but didn't you just say this? How is this charge in any way different from what you said a page or two ago? It was a goofy charge then, and it's a goofy charge now. Nobody other than you has ever presumed this was somehow a legally binding document. (Perhaps you ought to

quote Stephen Burnett again.)

All of the Book of Mormon witnesses, excepting Martin Harris, were related by blood or marriage either with the Smiths or Whitmers. Oliver Cowdery (married to Elizabeth Ann Whitmer and cousin to Joseph Smith), Hiram Page (married to Catherine Whitmer), and the five Whitmers were related by marriage. Of course, Hyrum Smith, Samuel Smith, and Joseph Smith Sr. were Joseph's brothers and father.

Mark Twain made light of this obvious problem:

"...I could not feel more satisfied and at rest if the entire Whitmer family had testified." – *Roughing It*, p.107-115

Mark Twain is awesome. Have you read what he had to say about Mormon women?

"Our stay in Salt Lake City amounted to only two days, and therefore we had no time to make the customary inquisition into the workings of polygamy and get up the usual statistics and deductions preparatory to calling the attention of the nation at large once more to the matter.

"I had the will to do it. With the gushing self-sufficiency of youth I was feverish to plunge in headlong and achieve a great reform here—until I saw the Mormon women. Then I was touched. My heart was wiser than my head. It warmed toward these poor, ungainly and pathetically "homely" creatures, and as I turned to hide the generous moisture in my eyes, I said, "No--the man that marries one of them has done an act of Christian charity which entitles him to the kindly applause of mankind, not their harsh censure--and the man that marries sixty of them has done a deed of open-handed generosity so sublime that the nations should stand uncovered in his presence and worship in silence."

As to the fact that all the witnesses were related, I'm not quite sure what your point is. This is only really an issue with the Eight Witnesses, not the the Three Witnesses, who weren't related except in the case Oliver Cowdery, who was third cousin to Joseph's mother, making him Joseph's third cousin once removed. (I'm curious as to how many of your third cousins once removed you know personally.) Citing Oliver's marriage to Elizabeth Ann Whitmer does not support your argument at all, as the marriage took place in 1832, two years after the publication of the Book of Mormon.

The supernatural nature of the experience of the Three Witnesses is a far bigger deal than the more mundane experience of the Eight Witnesses, and, in any case, this is just one more ad hominem attack that doesn't address the particulars of their testimony.

Within eight years, all of the Three Witnesses were excommunicated from the Church. This is what Joseph Smith said about them in 1838:

"Such characters as...John Whitmer, David Whitmer, Oliver Cowdery, and Martin Harris, are too mean to mention; and we had liked to have forgotten them." – History of the Church Vol. 3, Ch. 15, p. 232

This is what First Counselor of the First Presidency and once close associate Sidney Rigdon had to say about Oliver Cowdery:

“...a lying, thieving, counterfeiting man who was ‘united with a gang of counterfeiters, thieves, liars, and blacklegs in the deepest dye, to deceive, cheat, and defraud the saints out of their property, by every art and stratagem which wickedness could invent...”

– February 15, 1841 Letter and Testimony, p.6-9

What does it say about the witnesses and their characters if even the Prophet and his counselor in the First Presidency thought they were questionable?

It says the witnesses, being personally insulted, had even more incentive to stick it to Joseph Smith and expose him as a fraud, which they could have done easily. Why didn't they?

As mentioned in the above "Polygamy/Polyandry" section, Joseph was able to influence and convince many of the 31 witnesses to lie and perjure in a sworn affidavit that Joseph was not a polygamist.

As mentioned above, this is not accurate. The 31 witnesses signed an affidavit – wait, do we have their original signatures? – stating that Joseph was not engaged in John C. Bennett's "spiritual wifery," which he was not, and that he was not an adulterer, which he also was not. No lie and no perjury.

Is it outside the realm of possibility that Joseph was also able to influence or manipulate the experiences of his own magical thinking treasure digging family and friends as witnesses?

I would think so, yes. Joseph spurned them, insulted them, and kicked them out, and they faced personal and financial ruin for refusing to recant. If their testimony was based solely on Joseph's manipulations, their disaffection every reason to expect them to expose him as a fraud at the earliest opportunity.

If the Prophet Joseph Smith could get duped with the Kinderhook Plates thinking that the 19th century fake plates were a legitimate record of a "descendent of Ham," how is having gullible guys like Martin Harris handling the covered gold plates going to prove anything?

Joseph was not duped by the Kinderhook Plates, and Martin saw the plates and the angel, contrary to the sixth(!) time you have invoked this piece of unreliable hearsay.

James Strang's claims and Voree Plates Witnesses are distinctive and more impressive compared to the Book of Mormon Witnesses:

- All of Strang's witnesses were not related to one another through blood or marriage like the Book of Mormon Witnesses were.
- Some of the witnesses were not members of Strang's church.
- The Voree Plates were displayed in a museum for both members and non-members to view and examine.
- Strang provided 4 witnesses who testified that on his instructions, they actually dug the plates up for Strang while he waited for them to do so. They confirmed that the ground looked previously undisturbed.

Just as my tent looked undisturbed when I found the dead fish in it. We've been over this already. I cannot and will not recant!

The Shakers and Ann Lee:



The Shakers felt that "in a chosen female known by the name of Ann Lee, the Lord God of Heaven, to the Inhabitants of Earth, in a chosen female known as Mother in the work of redemption" (Sacred Roll and Book, p.558). The Shakers, of course, did not believe in the Book of Mormon, but they had a book entitled A Holy, Sacred and Divine Roll and Book; From the Lord God of Heaven, to the Inhabitants of Earth.

Neat!

More than 60 individuals gave testimony to the Sacred Roll and Book, which was published in 1843. Although not all of them mention angels appearing, some of them tell of many angels visiting them. One woman told of eight different visions.

Here is the testimony statement:

We, the undersigned, hereby testify, that we saw the holy Angel standing upon the house-top, as mentioned in the foregoing declaration, holding the Roll and Book.

Betsey Boothe. Louisa Chamberlain. Caty De Witt. Laura Ann Jacobs. Sarah Maria Lewis. Sarah Ann Spencer. Lucinda McDoniels. Maria Hedrick.

So we shouldn't accept the testimony of Book of Mormon witnesses because the Shakers, who no longer exist and who's central claims have been completely discredited by the passage of time, claimed to see angels? How is that anything but a non sequitur? Each testimony should be evaluated on its own merits. As it stands, the Shakers no longer exist, so I don't see much value in reviewing their testimonies.

Joseph Smith only had three witnesses who claimed to see an angel. The Shakers, however, had a large number of witnesses who claimed they saw angels and the Sacred Roll and Book.

And the Shakers no longer exist, which pretty much destroys the credibility of Shaker witness claims.

There are over a hundred pages of testimony from "Living Witnesses."

And yet the Shakers aren't living any more – it's a completely dead and discredited movement. Are you arguing that we ought to resurrect the dead Shaker movement based on these witnesses?

The evidence seems to show that Martin Harris accepted the Sacred Roll and Book as a divine revelation.

No, it doesn't, no matter how many times you recycle the same tired hearsay quotes. (I think it's four for this one.)

Clark Braden stated: "Harris declared repeatedly that he had as much evidence for a Shaker book he had as for the Book of Mormon" (The Braden and Kelly Debate, p.173).

Braden, who never met Harris, passed along this uncorroborated hearsay years after Harris's death and decades after Harris allegedly said it. I resent having to type that again. You may enjoy repeating yourself, but I find it tedious.

Why should we believe the Book of Mormon witnesses but not the Shakers witnesses?

Because time has conclusively demonstrated that the Shaker witnesses were wrong, based on the fact that the Shakers no longer exist.

What are we to make of the reported Martin Harris comment that he had as much evidence for the Shaker book he had as for the Book of Mormon?

We are to make that you are obsessed with unreliable hearsay nonsense and enjoy repeating yourself.

In light of the James Strang/Voree Plates witnesses,

who claimed to see something as mundane as a fish in a tent,

the fact that all of the Book of Mormon Witnesses – except Martin Harris – were related to either Joseph Smith or David Whitmer,

which is overblown – third cousin once removed? – and largely irrelevant,

along with the fact that all of the witnesses were treasure hunters who believed in second sight,

which is not true,

and in light of their superstitions and reputations...

which were mild superstitions in line with conventional 19th Century thinking, and the undeniable fact that they enjoyed very good reputations for honesty and good character,

why would anyone gamble with their lives in believing in a book based on anything these men said or claimed or what's written on the testimonies of the Witnesses page in the Book of Mormon?

ANCIENT PROPHETS WENT THROUGH ALL THE TROUBLE OF ENGRAVING, STORING, COMPILING, HIDING, AND PROTECTING THE GOLD PLATES



AND MORONI EVEN CAME BACK AS AN ANGEL ALL SO JOSEPH SMITH COULD TRANSLATE THEM JUST BY PEERING AT A ROCK IN HIS HAT?

If the entirety of your faith in the Book of Mormon is based on the written testimony of these witnesses, then you may have a point. Fortunately, the Lord has made provision for each of us to receive our own direct witness from heaven as a result of our own study and prayer. That's the witness people cite when they stand up and bear their testimonies of the Book of Mormon on the first Sunday of every month.

On Fast Sunday, have you ever heard anyone attribute their testimony to the statement of the Three or Eight Witnesses? I surely haven't, but, given that you were apparently teaching missionary discussions that cited

these statements as legally binding affidavits, your experience seems to be quite different from my own.

The testimony of the 11 witnesses, like all signs from heaven, are designed to confirm faith, not create it from scratch. You proceed from a false premise here. Your assumptions are what are unreliable, not the Book of Mormon witnesses.

The mistake that is made by 21st century Mormons is that they're seeing the Book of Mormon Witnesses as empirical, rational, nineteenth-century men instead of the nineteenth-century magical thinking, superstitious, and treasure digging men they were.

No, the mistake is that 21st Century ex-Mormons like you condescend to 19th Century men and distort harmless beliefs in antiquated superstitions into something more significant than they actually were.

They have ignored the peculiarities of their worldview, and by so doing, they misunderstand their experiences as witnesses.

It's very easy to misunderstand witnesses when you ignore everything they actually said in favor of a handful of hearsay statements that you repeat ad nauseum, each time pretending they're something new.

At the end of the day? It all doesn't matter.

It doesn't? Then why are you wasting my time?

The Book of Mormon Witnesses and their testimonies of the gold plates are irrelevant.

They are? Then why didn't you say so? I could have moved on to the next chapter.

It does not matter whether eleven 19th century treasure diggers with magical worldviews saw some gold plates or not.

Well, it matters somewhat that you misrepresent farmers and schoolteachers as professional treasure diggers, as your eagerness to label them in the most negative light possible demonstrates your unwillingness to engage this issue with any attempt to keep an open mind.

It doesn't matter because of this one simple fact:

OOoo! Here it comes...

Joseph did not use the gold plates for translating the Book of Mormon.

What? That's it? Please don't tell me you're still hung up on the rock and the hat.

sigh

I don't know what else to say. The deeper I get into this reply, the less I think we understand each other. I honestly do not understand why the rock in the hat is such a huge obstacle for you. If Joseph had translated the record by means of plucking his own eyebrows and lighting them on fire, it would make no difference to me whatsoever. The product of the method, not the method itself, is what matters. The Book of Mormon is here; it exists, and it's a powerful work of scripture that has brought millions of people closer to God. You can't make it vanish in a puff of smoke just by posting pictures of Joseph looking like he's throwing up in a hat.

Moving on...

Temples & Freemasonry Concerns & Questions:

1. Just seven weeks after [Joseph's Masonic initiation](#), Joseph introduced the LDS endowment ceremony in [May 1842](#).

While there are elements of the temple ceremony that demonstrably precede Joseph's initiation into Masonry – chunks of the Book of Moses are in the endowment ceremony, for instance – I think you're absolutely right not to chalk this up to coincidence. The pattern Joseph set was that events served as catalysts for seeking revelation. Remember, the Word of Wisdom came as the result of Emma getting tired of cleaning up tobacco stains. The revelation on plural marriage came after Joseph asked a question in the course of translating the KJV. Answers from heaven are received only after someone asks.

Since revelation doesn't come in a vacuum, my guess is that Joseph sensed something ancient in the Masonic ceremony and asked about it, which led to the endowment. I don't think there's anything sinister in acknowledging the possible connection.

2. President Heber C. Kimball, a Mason himself and a member of the First Presidency for 21

years, made the following statement:

“We have the true Masonry. The Masonry of today is received from the apostasy which took place in the days of Solomon, and David. They have now and then a thing that is correct, but we have the real thing.”

– Stanley B. Kimball, Heber C. Kimball and Family: The Nauvoo Years, p.458

Sure. In other words, the Masons have some ancient practices – “now and then a thing is correct - mixed in with apostate corruptions, and the endowment represents the truth of what masonry should be.

3.If Masonry had the original temple ceremony but became distorted over time, why doesn't the LDS ceremony more closely resemble an earlier form of Masonry, which would be more correct rather than the exact version that Joseph Smith was exposed to in his March 1842 Nauvoo, Illinois initiation?

Two things. One, you're frankly acknowledging here that the Mormon endowment ceremony is different enough from Masonry to be its own thing and not just a pale copy of Masonic ritual, which is the accusation that most critics of the Church make. Second, why should an earlier form of Masonry be more correct? The rituals of Solomon's temple preceded Masonry by thousands of years. Whatever modern Masons have made to their ceremony took place over a relatively short period of time in comparison, they would be unlikely to have any bearing on whatever portion of truth survived the intervening millennia between Solomon and the Masons.

You're making assumptions again and not recognizing that you're likely to be proceeding from a flawed premise.

4. Freemasonry has zero links to Solomon's temple.

Define “links.” You would be correct to say that it's impossible to demonstrate that the rituals of Masonry have been handed down from the time of Solomon in an unbroken chain. You would be incorrect to say that Masons have not appropriate their understanding of ancient practices into their ceremony. The “link,” then, would not be a passed-down line of authority but one of similar ideas, many of which the Masons undoubtedly got wrong but a few, apparently, they got right.

Although more a Church folklore, with origins from comments made by early Mormon Masons such as Heber C. Kimball, than being Church doctrine, it's a myth that the endowment ceremony has its origins from Solomon's temple or that Freemasonry passed down parts of the endowment over the centuries from Solomon's temple.

The Church makes no attempt to claim that either Freemasonry or the endowment claim their authority from being “passed down” from antiquity.

By way of comparison, the Roman Catholic Church claims their priesthood authority through apostolic succession, while the Mormons claim that their priesthood authority was restored after a long period of apostasy. So while one group claims to have their authority passed down in an

unbroken chain while the other claims it was lost and then restored, both groups agree that there is such a thing as priesthood authority, and that there was such a thing as priesthood authority anciently.

Similarly, our authority to perform the endowment ceremony and sealing ordinances does not come from a claim of “masonic succession,” so to speak. While many, including me, believe that what we do now and temples bears a resemblance to what they did anciently – although we don’t know the extent of that resemblance – our authority to perform these ordinances came by means of modern revelation, not from being passed down.

Solomon’s temple was all about animal sacrifice.

Oh, nonsense. Solomon’s temple had a whole lot more going on than just animal sacrifice. If you doubt me, then consult the [infallible Wikipedia](#).

Freemasonry has its origins to stone tradesmen in medieval Europe – not in 950 BC Jerusalem.

True, although Freemasonry was attempting to mimic the rituals of what happened in 950 BC Jerusalem.

If there’s no connection to Solomon’s temple, what’s so divine about a man-made medieval European secret fraternity and its rituals?

I don’t know of any prophet or apostle who has ever claimed Freemasonry is divine. If they did, we’d all be counseled to become Freemasons.

5. Why did the Church remove the blood oath penalties and the 5 Points of Fellowship at the veil from the endowment ceremony in 1990? Both 100% Masonic rituals?

Probably because both were 100% Masonic rituals and unnecessary.

What does this say about the Temple and the endowment ceremony if 100% pagan Masonic rituals were in it from its inception?

It says somebody made a mistake, and that we don’t believe in infallibility.

What does it say about the Church if it removed something that Joseph Smith said he restored and which would never again be taken away from the earth?

Joseph Smith said that penalties and the 5 Points of Fellowship would never be taken from the earth? When? Perhaps you’re referring to the sealing power, the keys of the priesthood, and the spirit of Elijah, all of which are still very much a part of temple worship.

6. Is God really going to require people to know secret tokens, handshakes, and signs to get into the Celestial Kingdom? If so, Masons, former Mormons, anti-Mormons, unworthy Mormons as well as non-Mormons who’ve seen the endowment on YouTube or read about the signs/

handshakes/tokens online should pass through the pearly gates with flying colors.

So should every person who has ever lived on the earth, as we intend to do temple work for every child of God who comes to earth in mortality.

7.Does the eternal salvation, eternal happiness, and eternal sealings of families really depend on medieval originated Masonic rituals in multi-million dollar castles?

Earlier, you admitted that the endowment ceremony has significantly departed from Masonry, and now you call the endowment nothing more than “medieval originated Masonic rituals.” Which is it? Make up your mind.

Eternal salvation, eternal happiness, and eternal sealings depend on the Atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ. The rituals are symbols that connect us to God, but it is God that saves, not the rituals.

Is God really going to separate good couples and their children who love one other and who want to be together in the next life because they object to uncomfortable and strange Masonic temple rituals and a polygamous heaven?

Why should he? All those children will have these rituals performed on their behalf, so there will be no need to separate them. The temple doctrine of redemption of the dead are extraordinarily inclusive and know of no parallel in the wider Christian world. But it's nice that you got another dig in there about polygamy instead of one more mention of the rock in the hat.

Science Concerns & Questions:

The problem Mormonism encounters is that so many of its claims are well within the realm of scientific study, and as such, can be proven or disproven.

No, the real problem is that you're about to make a lot of scientific claims about Mormonism that Mormonism doesn't make for itself.

To cling to faith in these areas, where the overwhelming evidence is against it, is willful ignorance, not spiritual dedication.

That's probably true, except it's not necessarily for Mormons to “cling to faith” in the areas you're going to describe.

1.2 Nephi 2:22 and Alma 12:23-24 state there was no death of any kind (humans, all animals, birds, fish, dinosaurs, etc.) on this earth until the “Fall of Adam”,

Here's 2 Nephi 2:22:

“And now, behold, if Adam had not transgressed he would not have fallen, but he would have remained in the garden of Eden. And all things which were created must have remained in the same state in which they were after they were created; and they must have remained forever, and

had no end.”

Where does this say there was no death of any kind on this earth before the Fall?

Here’s Alma 12: 23-24:

“And now behold, I say unto you that if it had been possible for Adam to have partaken of the fruit of the tree of life at that time, there would have been no death, and the word would have been void, making God a liar, for he said: If thou eat thou shalt surely die.

“And we see that death comes upon mankind, yea, the death which has been spoken of by Amulek, which is the temporal death; nevertheless there was a space granted unto man in which he might repent; therefore this life became a probationary state; a time to prepare to meet God; a time to prepare for that endless state which has been spoken of by us, which is after the resurrection of the dead.”

Where does this say there was no death of any kind on this earth before the Fall?

which according to [D&C 77:6-7](#) occurred 7,000 years ago.

Here’s D&C 77:6-7:

6 Q. What are we to understand by the book which John saw, which was sealed on the back with seven seals?

A. We are to understand that it contains the revealed will, mysteries, and the works of God; the hidden things of his economy concerning this earth during the seven thousand years of its continuance, or its temporal existence.

7 Q. What are we to understand by the seven seals with which it was sealed?

A. We are to understand that the first seal contains the things of the first thousand years, and the second also of the second thousand years, and so on until the seventh.

Where do these scriptures mention the date of the Fall of Adam?

This scripture has long fascinated me, as it refers to the seven thousand years of the earth’s “temporal existence.” What does that mean? Since we reject ex nihilo creation and believe the matter out of which the earth was made is eternal, surely that dirt is older than 7,000 years – it’s so old, in fact, that it can’t really be measured. Is that what D&C 77 is saying – the physical planet has only existed for 7,000 years? (Actually, the real number would be less than 6,000 years, because the last thousand years of the temporal existence would constitute the millennium in which Christ reigns personally on the earth.) Because that’s not just inconsistent with science; it’s inconsistent with scripture.

7,000 years isn’t the chronological age of dirt; it’s the length of earth’s “continuance” or “temporal existence.” So what does that mean?

I think of it in these terms. How old is the city of London?

[According to Wikipedia](#), infallible source of all wisdom, the city was founded in 43 AD and first referred to as “Londinium” a little less than a century later. Did London exist prior to 43 AD? Well, physically, yes, of course it did. The Thames was flowing, but it wasn’t called the Thames. All the dirt was presumably there, too, but it wasn’t called London, because there was no one there to call it London. So it really wasn’t quite London yet, despite its geographical relationship to the town and then city that would later occupy that spot of ground.

History is concerned with chronology and where there is no chronology, there isn’t really any history to speak of, either. Anthropologists refer to the era prior to man’s arrival as “pre-history,” as in “prehistoric times.” So when does history begin?

Specifically, if the chunks of matter that make up the earth have always existed, at what point did they participate in earth’s “continuance” or “temporal,” i.e. time-based, “existence?” I submit that the criteria is the same as that of when London began.

History began when people showed up who were capable of recording time, which would require mathematics, writing, and philosophy – in a word, civilization. It’s not scientifically ludicrous to say that, regardless of biological origins, functional human civilization is somewhere around 7,000 years old, give or take. In any case, I don’t think the idea of earth’s 7,000 year-old temporal existence mentioned in Latter-Day Saint scripture ought to be viewed through an *ex nihilo* filter, nor do I think it presents a significant intellectual roadblock to credible theories about the origins of both the earth and the life upon it.

So where does the Fall of Adam fit into that timeframe? No idea. God has not seen fit to reveal the dates or the process, so I feel no responsibility to worry about it or to reject scientific evidence about both the age of the earth and the origins of life.

It is scientifically established there has been life and death on this planet for billions of years. How does the Church reconcile this?

It doesn’t.

“Whether the mortal bodies of man evolved in natural processes to present perfection, through the direction and power of God; whether the first parents of our generations, Adam and Eve, were transplanted from another sphere, with immortal tabernacles, which became corrupted through sin and the partaking of natural foods, in the process of time; whether they were born here in mortality, as other mortals have been, are questions not fully answered in the revealed word of God.” (Improvement Era, August, 1908, 778.)

“The Church itself has no philosophy about the modus operandi employed by the Lord in His creation of the world” (Joseph F. Smith, Juvenile Instructor 46 (April 1911): 208-09).

That one’s kind of fun, as Joseph F.’s son, Joseph Fielding Smith, wrote a book called *Man: His Origin and Destiny* to refute evolution and claim the earth was only a few thousand years old. He tried to get the Church to publish the book, but my great-grandfather David O. McKay, who was a firm believer in evolution, death before the Fall, and geological time, disagreed with Joseph

Fielding Smith on just about everything in that book.

Here's a letter President McKay wrote on the subject:

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints
47 E. South Temple Street
Salt Lake City, Utah
David O. McKay, President

February 3, 1959
Dr. A. Kent Christensen
Department of Anatomy
Cornell University Medical College
1300 York Avenue
New York 21, New York

Dear Brother Christensen:

I have your letter of January 23, 1959 in which you ask for a statement of the Church's position on the subject of evolution.

The Church has issued no official statement on the subject of the theory of evolution.

Neither 'Man, His Origin and Destiny' by Elder Joseph Fielding Smith, nor 'Mormon Doctrine' by Elder Bruce R. McConkie, is an official publication of the Church...

Sincerely yours,
[signed]
David O. McKay
(President)

How do we explain the massive fossil evidence showing not only animal death but also the deaths of at least 14 different Hominin species over the span of 250,000 years prior to Adam?

We explain it by teaching precisely that information in biology classes at church-owned universities like BYU and BYU-Idaho.

2.If Adam and Eve are the first humans, how do we explain the 14 other Hominin species who lived and died 35,000 – 250,000 years before Adam? When did those guys stop being human?

That's a question that B.H. Roberts and James E. Talmage frequently asked, as they believed in the idea of "pre-Adamites," as they called them. It is true many prophets and apostles doubted evolution, but many more have not. The Church has taken no official position on the subject, so there's no need for it to "explain" any of this, as it's not spiritually relevant. The Church is concerned with why God created the heavens and the earth, not how.

3.Science has proven that there was no worldwide flood 4,500 years ago.

No, it hasn't, because it's impossible to prove a negative.

Time for Dan to make an encore presentation:



I will grant you, however, that science has provided compelling evidence that suggests a worldwide flood 4,500 years ago or at any other time would be highly unlikely.

Do you really literally believe in the flood story where 600-year-old Noah built a massive ark with dimensions that equate to about 450 feet long, 75 feet wide and 45 feet deep?

You've touched on a sore spot in the Bennett household. Because there was a time when I answered an unequivocal "yes" to that question. Then I married a brilliant biology major who, while a faithful Latter-day Saint, also believed that much of the story of Noah is kind of ridiculous.

I've since discovered that there fully active and faithful Latter-day Saints of every stripe who believe anything and everything that it is possible to believe about the story of Noah – some who insist that it is 100% scientifically accurate, and others who insist the whole thing is a fable, and everywhere in between. The Church does not require its members to believe any scientific information about Noah and the ark.

That Noah and his very small family took two of each unclean creature and seven of every clean creature and all the food and fresh water that would be needed on board for 6 months? And that after the flood, Noah and his family released the animals and they, along with Noah's family of eight repopulated – via incest – the entire planet?

Simple mathematics show that there was insufficient room on the ark to house all the animal species found on the planet, let alone the food required to feed all of them.

How did the carnivores survive? There would not have been nearly enough herbivores to sustain the carnivores during the voyage and the months after the ark landed. What would the herbivores eat after the flood subsided?

There are a bunch of other problems with the global flood and Noah's ark story but I find it incredible that this is supposed to be taken literally considering the abundance of evidence against it.

Well, for my part, as I've discussed the matter with my brilliant wife, I've been persuaded that, while I believe there was an actual, historical prophet named Noah who built an ark and put animals on it and survived a flood, I also believe that a great deal of the story is figurative and/or allegorical, and I neither know nor particularly care which parts are which.

While I remain open to the supernatural possibility that God engineered miracle after miracle to make the impossible possible, I am also open to the possibility that the flood was smaller and more localized than many assume, and that Noah's world, at least as he perceived it, may not have been the entire globe. In any case, I do not see the story of Noah as an impediment to honest scientific inquiry, nor do I see any action on the part of the Church to punish or even counsel Church members who are not willing to read Genesis as a scientific treatise.

Am I expected to believe in a god who would wipe out the entire planet like that? Kill millions of women and innocent children for the actions of others? What kind of a god is this?

If you take the story at face value, the people who were wiped out were not innocents. Everyone in Noah's world was corrupt and wicked. I am open to the possibility, however, that Noah's world, as he understood it, was not the entirety of the globe, and that there were innocents outside of Noah's awareness who did not perish in what may have been a localized and not a global flood.

Other events/claims that science has discredited:

- Tower of Babel

Science has nothing, really, to say about the Tower of Babel. Nobody knows where it was, or it least where it was supposed to have been. As with Noah, I think this story is based in some kind of historical fact. I think there was an actual Tower of Babel, but I neither know nor particularly care how much of the story that has been handed down is literal or figurative. I assume there are elements of both.

- People living to be 600+ years old

Hmmm. Never really thought about that one, to be honest. I guess I would have to treat this little tidbit the way I deal with all supposed conflicts between religion and science – with a humble recognition that we neither fully understand religion or science, and that all such conflicts will vanish when our knowledge is perfect. In the meantime, people should continue to pursue knowledge both by study and by faith, both in science and in religion.

- Humans and animals having their origins from Noah's family and the animals contained in the ark 4,500 years ago. It is scientifically impossible, for example, for the bear to have evolved into several species (Sun Bear, Polar Bear, Grizzly Bear, etc.) from common ancestors from Noah's time.

Again, how much of Noah's story should be taken literally and how much of it is figurative? We simply don't know.

- Jonah and the whale

Man, that's a freaky story from beginning to end, no doubt. The finale is priceless - Jonah sits under a magic gourd that grows overnight and gets mad when God doesn't blow Ninevah away, and then a worm eats the gourd. It's just – odd. My reaction is that there is kernel of historical truth in there somewhere, but there's also a lot of ancient cultural weirdness that modern readers like you and me just don't get.

- People turning into salt in Sodom & Gomorrah

This one doesn't bug me all that much, to be honest. If you run back into a war zone where everything is on fire, then what happens to you? I think this was less magic and more burned-alive stuff described with magical language.

- As mentioned in Book of Abraham section, the sun receives its “light from the revolutions of Kolob.”

And as replied to in the Book of Abraham section, the text itself suggests this is merely an Egyptian metaphor. (Also, you are the sunshine of my life.)

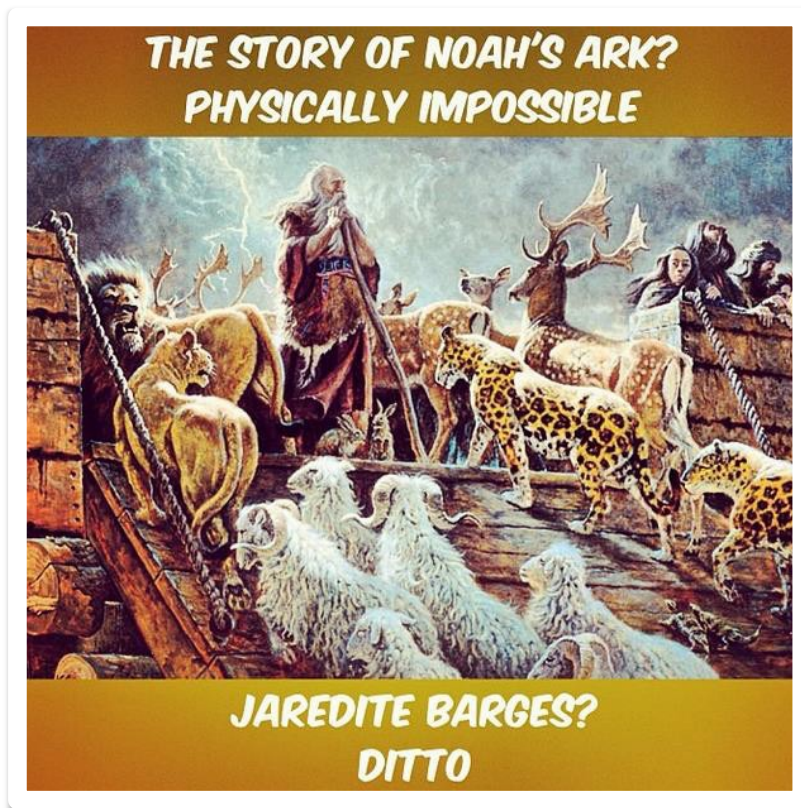
They carried honey bees across the ocean? Swarms of them? All manner of them which was upon the face of the land? (Ether 2:3)

We don't have an inventory of how many they carried, and it's likely there were plenty of bees in the Americas when they got there.

Putting a hole on the bottom and on the top of a submarine-like vessel that is tight like a dish so that when you're in need of air, you unplug one hole but make sure to plug it back in when you go back in the water? (Ether 2:19-20)

I've always loved the phrase “tight like unto a dish.” Because I have a lot of dishes, and “tight” isn't an adjective I use to describe them. Actually, I think it's cool that they go out of their way to describe how they dealt with such physical necessities. How did they go to the bathroom, I wonder? 'Cause things really start to smell when you're living in a space tight like unto a dish.

The bottom line is that you have to accept the possibility of miraculous intervention, and I do. I also think that when everything is said and done, we'll get scientific updates about how it all worked. For now, the Lord hasn't seen fit to explain it, so the assumption should be that there's more information we just don't have. Certainly none of these stories should be used as an excuse to thwart honest scientific inquiry.



For with God nothing shall be impossible.” (Luke 1:37.)

Or, if you want to go secular...

“There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”

- *Hamlet* (1.5.167-8)

Maybe this makes me naïve, but I feel no need to raise my hand in Sunday School and point out the scientific improbability of 600-year-old people, but neither do I get indignant when a biology teacher describes the evolutionary process. Mormonism teaches that we should seek after truth wherever we can find it, which means we should learn more about science, not less, because we assume that eventually all truth can be circumscribed into one great whole.

Scriptures Concerns & Questions:

To believe in the scriptures, I have to believe in a god who endorsed murder, genocide, infanticide, rape, slavery, selling daughters into sex slavery, polygamy, child abuse, stoning disobedient children, pillage, plunder, sexism, racism, human sacrifice, animal sacrifice, killing people who work on the Sabbath, death penalty for those who mix cotton with polyester, and so on.

No, you have to believe that ancient scripture is hard to understand to modern audiences, that it includes a mix of literal and figurative that we aren't fully capable of discerning, and that human error can get in the way of correctly interpreting God. Also, you have to believe that Mormonism doesn't believe in inerrant scripture.

Aside from scientifically discredited stories mentioned earlier, the following scriptures are some among many which make it hard for me believe the scriptures literally and that the scriptures hold any credibility:

Those are two very different things. Many scriptures aren't intended to be interpreted literally, which means they're designed to lack scientific credibility. That doesn't mean they necessarily lack spiritual credibility.

1. [D&C 132](#):

I'm supposed to believe in a god who issued an FLDS style revelation that states stuff like: the only form of polygamy permitted is a union with a virgin

We've talked about this. In context here, "virgin" doesn't mean what you think it means.

after first giving the opportunity to the first wife to consent to the marriage. If the first wife doesn't consent, the husband is exempt and may still take an additional wife, but the first wife must at least have the opportunity to consent. In case the first wife doesn't consent, she will be "destroyed."

"Destroyed" doesn't mean what you think it means, either. You've already said all this.

2. Also, the new wife must be a virgin before the marriage and be completely monogamous after the marriage or she will be destroyed.

Again, "virgin" and "destroyed" mean "sexually pure" and "left without posterity in the marriage." Context helps. So does avoiding reading scripture using narrow, legalistic interpretations.

3. [Numbers 31](#):

This is truly despicable behavior from God and Moses. Under God's direction, Moses' army defeats the Midianites. They kill all the adult males, but take the women and children captive. When Moses learns that they left some alive, he angrily says: "Have you saved all the women alive? Kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman that hath known man by lying with him. But all the women children, that have not known a man by lying with him, keep alive for yourselves." So they went back and did as Moses – the Lord's prophet – commanded, killing everyone except for the virgins. In this way, they got 32,000 virgins. This is the same prophet that Joseph Smith claimed to have [appeared](#) to him and Oliver Cowdery in the Kirtland Temple on April 3, 1836 for the "gathering of Israel."

Nice little maneuver to tie Joseph and Oliver to ancient genocide for which they were not even remotely responsible. Did you know that Gwyneth Paltrow named her son Moses – after the prophet who killed the Midianites and gathered up their virgins? What is she, Hitler?

Look, you can find apologetic explanations of this story from any number of sources, most of them non-Mormon, and scholars who understand these ancient cultures can provide context that neither of us understand. From my non-scholarly Webelos-leader perspective, the bottom line is that the Old Testament is a record of a time and culture wholly displaced from our own, and it's

written with a mixture of figurative stories and historical reality. It's never easy for even the smartest or most inspired minds to know which is which.

When you bump into a wacky story like this, you have to recognize that there's huge chunks of info that we just don't have, and that Mormons, unlike many orthodox Christians, teach that the Bible contains errors, and some of them are real doozies. Just know that if Mormons or anyone try to use these passages to justify modern genocide and rape, I'm going to run as fast and far as I can in the opposite direction.

4.1 Nephi 4:

The Lord commands Nephi to murder (decapitate) Laban for the brass plates. Never mind that Laban was drunk and defenseless. The argument that Laban would send his servants after Nephi and his brothers is ridiculous considering that the same God who had no problem lighting stones and taming swarms of bees (Ether 2-3) for the Brother of Jared can also preserve Nephi. This story has been used as a defense in killings by religious people.

No doubt God could preserve Nephi. No doubt God could have teleported the plates from Laban's study into Lehi's lap. In fact, God has the capacity to end world hunger, enforce world peace, and rid the world of Donald Trump. But in doing so, he would defeat the whole purpose of mortality, where we are each called upon to exercise our agency and walk by faith. That means that God doesn't use his Deus Ex Machina very often, if at all. Nephi had a difficult moral decision to make, and such decisions always involve competition between two righteous values.

John Welch's [discussion of the legality of Nephi's actions](#) is an interesting perspective on this, too.

5.Exodus 12:12:

God kills all the firstborn children in Egypt except for those who put blood on their doors? What kind of a god is this? Like the flood, what kind of a loving god would kill innocent children for the actions of others?

Does the Book of Exodus provide a specific body count? How much of this is Old Testament hyperbole? How historically and scientifically accurate should we assume this, or any other Old Testament story, to be?

As for "what kind of a loving god would kill innocent children for the actions of others," the answer is a god who would sacrifice his perfectly innocent Only Begotten Son for your sins and mine. This story is dripping with messianic symbolism, which suggests that a figurative rather than a literal interpretation of this story is a wiser approach.

6.Deuteronomy 21:18-21:

Got a rebellious kid who doesn't listen? Take him to the elders and to the end of the gates and stone him to death!

Verse 21 ends with the phrase, "and all Israel shall hear, and fear." This reads to me like it's a scare tactic rather than an actual thing that people did. After all, how many parents, even with rebellious kids, would voluntarily have their own children killed?

7. Exodus 35:1-2:

God commands death penalty for those who work on the Sabbath trying to support their families.

Again, does Exodus provide hard data about how often these laws were enforced? The Law of Moses was still in effect during Christ's day, and there are several exchanges between the Pharisees and the Savior where Jesus refuses to enforce these kind of gruesome provisions and suffers no negative repercussions for doing so. When he counsels the Pharisees that the sinless should cast the first stone at the adulterous woman, the Pharisees simply walk away, leaving the ancient law unenforced. These laws sure sound scary, but in practice, it seems likely that they were largely empty threats.

8. Number 21:5-9:

God doesn't like to hear whining and ingratitude so he sends out a bunch of snakes to kill the people. When the people had enough of the snakes, they ask Moses to tell God to quit it. God decides Moses is persuasive and tells Moses to put a snake on a pole and tell the people to look at the pole and they won't die. So, the pole is built, the people look at it and they don't die. The moral of the story? Don't whine or God will send in the snakes.

No, the moral of the story is "look to God and live." This can be found repeatedly in the Book of Mormon:

"Yea, did he not [Moses] bear record that the Son of God should come? And as he lifted up the brazen serpent in the wilderness, even so shall he be lifted up who should come.

And as many as should look upon that serpent should live, even so as many as should look upon the Son of God with faith, having a contrite spirit, might live, even unto that life which is eternal." (Helaman 8:14-15)

Lots of important symbolism here, and getting caught up in a strict literal interpretation of the story probably isn't helpful.

9. Judges 19:22-29:

After picking up his concubine from his father-in-law's house, a certain Levite settles in Gibeah for the night. The men of the city attempt to sodomize him, but end up raping the concubine until her death. As a response, the Levite dismembers his wife's corpse and sends her body parts throughout the land of Israel. Who needs R or X-rated movies when you got scripture like this?

A gruesome story, surely, but neither God nor his prophets have anything to do with it. Were you expecting a PG-13-rated Bible?

As a believing Mormon, I tried to rationalize some of the craziness by saying, "Oh, this is in the crazy Old Testament when the Law of Moses was in force. Christ came and fulfilled the Law of Moses."

The problem with this is that the crazy god of the Old Testament was Jehovah. Who's Jehovah? The premortal Jesus Christ. So, Christ is the crazy god of the Old Testament.

And everything Christ does or has ever done has been done with the full approval of the Father. Did you think Jehovah was going rogue back in the old days?

The Christ of the Old Testament and the Christ of the New Testament are light years different.

No, the culture of the Old Testament and the culture of the New Testament are light years different. Understanding the Old Testament in its proper context requires a great deal of additional information, much of which we no longer have.

Again, I'm asked to believe in not only a part-time racist god and a part-time polygamous god but a part-time psychopathic schizophrenic one as well.

No, you're asked to believe that a perfect God is working with imperfect children in a fallen world, many of whom represent their interaction with God in imperfect ways.

Other Concerns & Questions:

These concerns are secondary to all of the above. These concerns do not matter if the foundational truth claims (Book of Mormon, First Visions, Prophets, Book of Abraham, Witnesses, Priesthood, Temples, etc.) are not true.

Okay.

1.Church's Dishonesty and Whitewashing Over Its History

Adding to the above deceptions and dishonesty over history (rock in hat translation,

Yeah, gotta get in at least one more mention of the rock in the hat.

polygamy/polyandry, multiple First Vision accounts, etc.),

Which, of course, we've repeatedly discussed already,

the following bother me:

2013 Official Declaration 2 Header Update Dishonesty:

- [Offending text](#):

"Early in its history, Church leaders stopped conferring the priesthood on black males of African descent. Church records offer no clear insights into the origins of this practice."

Haven't we already talked about this? I guess this is a minor variation on a previous theme – not a complaint about the priesthood ban, but on how we talk about it. The Church says that we don't have clear insights about how the ban started. That's an accurate statement. Yet you offer the following to claim that it's inaccurate:

The following is a 1949 First Presidency Statement:

Not really. The following is a letter written by the First Presidency to a private individual. Calling it a “First Presidency Statement” implies that it was issued to the general membership of the church, which it was not.

“August 17, 1949

Hey! That’s my birthday! (Well, not the 1949 part.)

The attitude of the Church with reference to Negroes remains as it has always stood. It is not a matter of the declaration of a policy but of direct commandment from the Lord,

I, too, have problems with the underlined part of this statement, as it contradicts President McKay’s labeling of the ban as a “policy, not a doctrine,” but I presume you’ve underlined it because you think it contradicts the statement that we don’t have clear insights into the origin of the ban. It doesn’t. We have no record of a revelation – i.e. a direct commandment from the Lord – putting the ban in place, and we don’t know when the ban actually began, given the fact that Joseph Smith ordained black people to the priesthood.

This was written in 1949, around a century after the ordination of black people stopped, but we can’t put a precise date on when that happened, since Church records offer no clear insights into the origins of this practice. (See what I did there?)

on which is founded the doctrine of the Church from the days of its organization, to the effect that Negroes may become members of the Church but that they are not entitled to the priesthood at the present time. The prophets of the Lord have made several statements as to the operation of the principle. President Brigham Young said: ‘Why are so many of the inhabitants of the earth cursed with a skin of blackness? It comes in consequence of their fathers rejecting the power of the holy priesthood, and the law of God. They will go down to death. And when all the rest of the children have received their blessings in the holy priesthood, then that curse will be removed from the seed of Cain, and they will then come up and possess the priesthood, and receive all the blessings which we now are entitled to.

Okay, I find the underlined portion to be a racist explanation for the ban that the Church has since disavowed, but how does it offer any clear insight as to how and when the ban began?

President Wilford Woodruff made the following statement: ‘The day will come when all that race will be redeemed and possess all the blessings which we now have.’

See? There was some light amid the darkness. No clear insight into the origins of the ban here, though.

The position of the Church regarding the Negro may be understood when another doctrine of the Church is kept in mind, namely, that the conduct of spirits in the premortal existence has some determining effect upon the conditions and circumstances under which these spirits take on mortality and that while the details of this principle have not been made known, the mortality is a

privilege that is given to those who maintain their first estate; and that the worth of the privilege is so great that spirits are willing to come to earth and take on bodies no matter what the handicap may be as to the kind of bodies they are to secure; and that among the handicaps, failure of the right to enjoy in mortality the blessings of the priesthood is a handicap which spirits are willing to assume in order that they might come to earth. Under this principle there is no injustice whatsoever involved in this deprivation as to the holding of the priesthood by the Negroes.

The First Presidency”

This is a faulty and racist explanation of the ban, surely, but it in no way offers insight into how and when the ban originated.

Along with the above First Presidency statement, there are many other statements and explanations made by prophets and apostles clearly “justifying” the Church’s racism.

Correct. But your problem, as you described it initially in this objection, is that you think the Church is lying when it says we don’t know when and how the ban first began. Faulty justifications for racism are a problem, but they’re a different problem than the one you’re raising here. You’re switching horses in midstream.

So, the 2013 edition Official Declaration 2 Header in the scriptures is not only misleading, it’s dishonest. We do have records – including from the First Presidency itself – with very clear insights on the origins of the ban on the blacks.

No, these are insights into why the ban was perpetuated, not into how it began. When was the ban implemented? We don’t know; Church records provide no clear insights. Was the ban a deliberate decision, or was it just something that started happening in practice and was later institutionalized as church policy? I believe the latter to be the case, but we don’t know for sure – Church records provide no clear insights.

December 2013 Update: The Church released a Race and the Priesthood essay which contradicts their 2013 Official Declaration 2 Header. In the essay, they point to Brigham Young as the originator of the ban.

Not really. The essay insists that Brigham Young was the first to announce the ban in 1852, but there is plenty of evidence that, in practice, black people had not been ordained to the priesthood for many years prior to that announcement. Did the ordination of black people stop at some point in Joseph Smith’s lifetime? Maybe. Many leaders after Brigham certainly thought it did. Fact is, we don’t know. Church records offer no clear insights as to the origins of the ban.

Further, they effectively throw 10 latter-day “Prophets, Seers, and Revelators” under the bus as they “disavow” the “theories” that these ten men taught and justified – for 130 years – as doctrine and revelation for the Church’s institutional and theological racism.

When additional light and knowledge comes into the world, we rejoice for what we now have rather than condemn those who didn’t have it. People are judged only according to the light and knowledge they have received. That way, nobody gets thrown under the bus.

Finally, they denounce the idea that God punishes individuals with black skin or that God withholds blessings based on the color of one's skin while completely ignoring the [contradiction](#) of the keystone Book of Mormon teaching exactly this.

You couldn't be more wrong on this one. The Book of Mormon's references to skin color have precisely zero to do with the priesthood ban, which was solely applied to men of African descent, not Native Americans, who, because of the Book of Mormon are promised tremendous blessings that are arguably even greater than those promised to us boring white people.

In addition, the Lamanites were never denied the priesthood and had no blessings withheld because of their skin color, and were often more righteous than the lighter-skinner Nephites. Here's some good anti-racist counsel from a Nephite prophet: "Wherefore, a commandment I give unto you, which is the word of God, that ye revile no more against them [i.e. the Lamanites] because of the darkness of their skins;" (Jacob 3:9.)

Yesterday's revelation and doctrine is today's "disavowed theories." Yesterday's prophets are today's disavowed heretics.

Amen! Here a little, precept on precept, great things to be revealed, and all that stuff I've already said every time you repeat this little mantra of yours.

Zina Diantha Huntington Young:

The following is a quick biographic snapshot of Zina:

She was married for 7.5 months and was about 6 months pregnant with her first husband, Henry Jacobs, when she married Joseph after being told Joseph's life was in danger from an angel with a drawn sword.

Wrong. She was sealed to Joseph for eternity only, never married to him. (No sex.) The angel with the drawn sword did not threaten to kill Joseph if he didn't marry Zina.

After Joseph's death, she married Brigham Young and had Young's baby while her first husband, Henry, was on a mission.

Since she and her first husband, Henry, were divorced when she had Young's baby, the fact that he was on a mission is irrelevant. You're misleadingly implying that this was polyandry, when it wasn't.

Zina would eventually become the Third General Relief Society President of the Church.

Good for her! Sound like she was a remarkable woman.

If anyone needs proof that the Church is still whitewashing history in 2014 aside from the above-mentioned issues, Zina is it.

Cool! A smoking gun! Let's hear it.

The following are 100% LDS sources:

Zina's biographical page on [LDS.org](#):

In the “Marriage and Family” section, it does not list Joseph Smith as a husband or concurrent husband with Henry Jacobs.

That’s probably because Joseph wasn’t her husband or concurrent husband with Henry Jacobs. They never lived together as husband and wife. They were sealed for eternity only, not married. (No sex.)

In the “Marriage and Family” section, it does not list Brigham Young as a concurrent husband with Henry Jacobs.

Probably because she was divorced from Henry Jacobs when she was married to Brigham Young. Divorce has a way of interfering with concurrent husbands.

There is nothing in there about the polyandry.

Which is not surprising, given the absence of polyandry.

It is deceptive in stating that Henry and Zina “did not remain together” while omitting that Henry separated only after Brigham Young took his wife and told Henry that Zina was now only his (Brigham) wife.

How is it deceptive? They did not, in fact, remain together. The idea that Henry was the only one who “separated” and that Brigham Young “took” Henry’s wife is rather sexist, as it presupposes that Zina herself had no say in the matter. The LDS.org biography plainly states that Zina was Brigham Young’s plural wife.

This is Zina’s index file on LDS-owned [FamilySearch.org](https://familysearch.org):

It clearly shows all of Zina’s husbands, including her marriage to Joseph Smith.

Wasn’t your problem that the LDS Church was whitewashing its history by purging references to Zina’s sealing to Joseph? If that’s the case, how did this reference escape the purge?

In any case, the purpose of Family Search.org is to gather information for temple work, so it makes sense that an eternity-only sealing would be referenced.

Why is Joseph Smith not listed as one of Zina’s husbands in the “Marriage and Family” section or anywhere else on her [biographical page on LDS.org](#)?

Because the “Marriage and Family” section doesn’t have any lists at all. She never lived with Joseph as his wife – she was sealed to him for eternity only. He was not one of her husbands in mortality.

Why is there not a single mention or hint of polyandry on her page

Because she was not engaged in polyandry.

or in that marriage section when she was married to two latter-day prophets and having children with Brigham Young while still being married to her first husband, Henry?

Because she was not married to two latter-day prophets. She was married to one and only sealed to the other. Also because she was not still married to Henry when she had a single child – not multiple children – with Brigham Young.

Brigham Young Sunday School Manual:

In the Church's Sunday School manual, Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Brigham Young, the Church changed the word "wives" to "[wife]."

Yeah, that probably wasn't the best choice. In fact, the parenthetical insertion probably calls attention to Brigham's polygamy more than if it had been left unchanged. (If the Church was really trying to whitewash, they would have just left off the S and not acknowledge that the text had been changed.) The case can be made that they're changing the word to apply Brigham's teachings to a modern audience, but if I were making the call, it's not what I would have done.

Not only is the manual deceptive in disclosing whether or not Brigham Young was a polygamist but it's deceptive in hiding Brigham Young's real teaching on marriage: "The only men who become Gods, even the Sons of God, are those who enter into polygamy." – [Journal of Discourses 11:269](#)

We've covered this. In the same speech, he clarified twice that this meant you had to accept the doctrine of polygamy, not necessarily be a polygamist. See above.

When you repeat yourself, I have to repeat myself. It gets really tedious.

2.Church Finances:

Zero transparency to members of the Church. Why is the one and only true Church keeping its books in the dark? Why would God's one true Church choose to "[keep them in darkness](#)" over such a stewardship?

Why do you provide a really weird link to a scripture in Ether that talks about oaths used to keep murders secret? Are you equating the Church's unwillingness to release financial statements with deliberately killing people?

History has shown time and time again that corporate secret wealth is breeding ground for corruption.

No, I don't think it has. Only publicly traded companies are required to make their financial records public, and the vast majority of businesses across the world are privately held and keep their finances to themselves. Almost all of these private businesses are small businesses, while the publicly traded corporations are huge corporations, which tend to be more corrupt than the mom-and-pop store down the street. Yet it's the family business with private financials who, by

your definition, are trafficking in “corporate secret wealth.”

The Church used to be transparent with its finances but stopped in [1959](#).

I didn’t know that. I also didn’t know, as the Wikipedia article to which you link states, that the Church “does disclose its financials in the United Kingdom and [Canada](#) where it is required to do so by law.”

Estimated \$1.5 billion megamall [City Creek Center](#):

Which was funded by a for-profit entity owned by the church and not paid for by tithes or offerings of church members.

Total Church humanitarian aid from 1985-2011: [\\$1.4 billion](#)

Your link appears to be broken, so I don’t know where you arrive at that figure, especially since your broken link was supposed to take me to a welfare services fact sheet put out by the Church. If the Church website is admitting that figure, then how can you say it’s not being transparent on this subject?

So, with a little Googling effort of my own, I found an interesting post over at [TimesandSeasons.org](#) that shows where this number came from, and why it’s bogus.

Attributing the figure to an article from someone named Cragun, T&S writes:

“Where does Cragun get this information? He draws from a single source: [This fact sheet](#), published by the church. It’s a single-page document, well worth a look. In fact, you should go take a look at it right now. In particular, watch the nomenclature.

The damning language is found in these lines:

Humanitarian assistance rendered (1985–2009)

Cash donations \$327.6 million

Value of material assistance \$884.6 million

That shows that the church gave about \$1 billion in total humanitarian aid over 25 years.

Or does it?

Look at that sheet again. It highlights numbers of food storehouses, food production for the needy, employment training, church-run thrift stores, and so on. The sheet states also discusses global work worldwide on disaster relief (such as responses to tsunami or earthquake victims). It uses different nomenclature for each type of donation. That is donations to worldwide emergency response are classified under the humanitarian label. But the extensive ongoing infrastructure to feed the needy is classified under the church welfare label. I contacted the church today and was able to verify that this is correct...

Given this crucial misunderstanding of the fact sheet, Cragun’s factual claim is incorrect and in

fact very misleading on an important point... observers can certainly still make critiques of church financial practices. Such critiques, however, should be based on accurate statements of fact.” [Emphasis in original.]

Something is fundamentally wrong with “the one true Church” spending more on an estimated \$1.5 billion dollar high-end megamall than it has in 26 years of humanitarian aid.

Given the reality that your figure is, in reality, only a small portion of the Church’s overall welfare efforts, this is criticism based on a substantial error on your part.

For an organization that claims to be Christ’s only true Church, this expenditure is a moral failure on so many different levels. For a Church that asks its members to sacrifice greatly for Temple building, such as the case of Argentinians giving the Church gold from their dental work for the São Paulo Brazil Temple, this mall business is absolutely shameful.

Why? Members weren’t asked to pay a dime for the mall, and none of their donations were used to fund it. As a for-profit business, the mall generates revenue, which means that the mall will ultimately earn its money back.

Of all the things that Christ would tell the prophet, the prophet buys a mall and says [“Let’s go shopping!”](#)? Of all the sum total of human suffering and poverty on this planet, the inspiration the Brethren feel for His Church is to get into the shopping mall business?!

The mall wasn’t built with the intent to get the Saints to “go shopping.” My understanding with regard to the purpose of City Creek was to stave off the urban blight that was gripping downtown Salt Lake City, which would ultimately have placed Temple Square and the surrounding buildings that constitute the headquarters of the Church into the middle of a dangerous slum. City Creek has accomplished that goal by revitalized downtown and making it safe for families. The fact that this was done without taxpayer or tithepayer dollars makes it a boon to the community that cost church members nothing at all.

Hinckley made the following dishonest statement in a [2002 interview](#) to a German journalist:

Reporter: In my country, the...we say the people’s Churches, the Protestants, the Catholics, they publish all their budgets, to all the public.

Hinckley: Yeah. Yeah.

Reporter: Why is it impossible for your Church?

Hinckley: Well, we simply think that the...that information belongs to those who made the contribution, and not to the world. That’s the only thing. Yes.

I don’t see this as dishonest, but I do think President Hinckley and the reporter are talking past each other here. President Hinckley’s talking about the confidentiality of individual contributions, which should rightly remain private, although that doesn’t seem to be what the reporter asked. It may be that President Hinckley misheard the question. Your link plays a very short snippet of this interview, and a broader context might be helpful.

Where can I see the Church’s books? I’ve paid tithing. Where can I go to see what the Church’s finances are? Where can current tithing paying members go to see the books? The

answer: we can't. Even if you've made the contributions as Hinckley stated above??

When I was a counselor in the bishopric, I was actually uncomfortable with how much I knew about the finances of ward members, based on my access to ward tithing and fast offering records. Much of that information is available to counselors and clerks, and it is remarkable to me how responsibly they handle that information. That information isn't the finances of the entire Church, of course, but my personal experience makes me more grateful for confidentiality than curious about the Church's books.

Unless you're an authorized General Authority or senior Church employee in the accounting department with a Non-Disclosure Agreement? You're out of luck. Hinckley knew this and for whatever reason made the dishonest statement.

Again, I don't see how the statement is dishonest, although I do see that it seems to be an answer to a question that wasn't asked. More context would be helpful.

Tithing: I find the following quote in the December 2012 Ensign very disturbing:

"If paying tithing means that you can't pay for water or electricity, pay tithing. If paying tithing means that you can't pay your rent, pay tithing. Even if paying tithing means that you don't have enough money to feed your family, pay tithing. The Lord will not abandon you."

Ripped out of context, it is disturbing. In the article this advice is given to someone who receives generous financial assistance from the Church in order to get back on their feet, assistance in a dollar amount in excess of the money they paid in tithing.

"Well, God tested Abraham by asking him to kill his son and besides, the Lord will take care of them through the Bishop's storehouse."

You put these words in quotes for some reason. Did a real person actually say this, or is this just another strawman argument?

Yes, the same god who tested Abraham is also the same crazy god who killed innocent babies and endorsed genocide, slavery, and rape.

Quite the non sequitur there. The weirdness of many Old Testament accounts does not deny anyone access to the bishop's storehouse.

Besides, whatever happened to self-sufficiency? Begging the Bishop for food when you had the money for food but because you followed the above Ensign advice and gave your food money to the Church you're now dependent on the Church for food money. Just a few paragraphs ago, you were upset that the Church doesn't offer enough humanitarian aid, and now you're complaining that they offer too much aid and make people dependent. Which is it?

3.Names of the Church:

- 1830: Church of Jesus Christ
- 1834: [The Church of the Latter Day Saints](#)
- 1838: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints

After deciding “Church of Jesus Christ” on April 6, 1830, Joseph Smith made the decision on May 3, 1834 to change the name of the Church to “The Church of the Latter Day Saints”. Why did Joseph take the name of “Jesus Christ” out of the very name of His restored Church? The one and only true Church on the face of the earth in which Christ is the Head?



Because there was already a church with the legal right to use the name “Church of Christ” that precluded Joseph from doing the same. (You say that they called themselves the “Church of Jesus Christ,” but from what I can tell, the name “Jesus” was absent from the original moniker.) So, absent any revelation, Joseph chose a name that would distinguish themselves from the other Church. The first time a name was given by revelation was in 1838, and that name, “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” is the same name the Church has consistently used from that day to this.

Four years later on April 26, 1838, the Church name was changed to “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints” and has remained ever since (except the hyphen was added about a century later to be grammatically correct).

Indeed. As I stated at the outset, I’m not concerned about fallible grammar.

Why would Christ instruct Joseph to name it one thing in 1830 and then change it in 1834 and then change it again in 1838?

I don’t think he would, and I don’t think he did. There’s no evidence that Christ instructed Joseph to give the Church any specific name prior to the 1838 revelation.

Is it reasonable to assume that God would periodically change the name of his Church?

This question only makes sense if you actually have evidence that God periodically changed the name of his Church, which you don't. The first time we have record of God naming His Church is in 1838, and there have been no changes to the name since the Lord Himself settled the question.

Why would the name of Christ be dropped from His one and only true Church for 4 whole years?

Because another church was using the name "Church of Christ," which prevented Joseph from using it.

What does this say about a Church that claims to be restored and guided by modern revelation?

It says that we do our best in the absence of direct guidance from heaven, but we don't mess with the Lord after he provides a revelation with a definitive answer.

If the Prophet Joseph Smith couldn't even get the name right for eight years then what else did he get wrong?

Since he was a fallible human being with agency like the rest of us, probably a lot. But this isn't a case of him getting anything wrong – since there was no revelation on the subject for eight years, he was free to use his best judgment during that same time frame. He would only be "wrong" if he had chosen a different name after the Lord settled the question via revelation in 1838. You'll notice the revelation naming the Church doesn't scold Joseph for getting anything wrong.

4. Anti-Intellectualism:

"Some things that are true are not very useful":

- Boyd K. Packer gave an eye-opening talk to Church Education System Instructors and faculty at a CES Symposium on the Doctrine & Covenants and Church History on August 22, 1981 entitled [The Mantle is Far, Far Greater Than the Intellect](#).

Packer said the following:

"There is a temptation for the writer or the teacher of Church history to want to tell everything, whether it is worthy or faith promoting or not. Some things that are true are not very useful."

And I really wish he hadn't said this, as it is open to the kind of misinterpretation you're applying to it. Because when you consider the intent of his statement rather than his poor choice of words, this becomes a rather artless way of stating an undeniably true – and useful – principle.

In fact, the CES Letter is a perfect example of Elder Packer's premise. Your purpose is to persuade people that the LDS Church is a fraud, so you cite truths that are useful to making that case, and you ignore the truths that are not. So you cite three different dubious hearsay statements about Martin Harris and repeat them over a dozen times, but you ignore the dozens of more reliable firsthand accounts that undermine your case, because those statements, while true, aren't useful to your purpose. (Actually, the analogy isn't really perfect, because the statements you quoted about Martin probably aren't true. But I'm sure you get the idea.)

The word “useful” is instructive, especially when you consider the audience to whom Elder Packer’s remarks were addressed. He wasn’t talking to the general membership of the Church in Conference; he was talking to a gathering of CES instructors, who are in the employ of the Church for the specific purpose of building the faith of LDS youth. There are many truths that are not useful to that specific purpose. It is true, for instance, that I played the role of Schroeder in “You’re a Good Man, Charlie Brown” in several productions in the Los Angeles area between 1981 and 1985. Is this true? Yes. It is a useful fact for CES Employees to use in their instruction of LDS youth? Probably not, no. (Although I’m proud that I’ve figured out a way to make both “Seinfeld” and “Dilbert” useful in this reply.)

Joseph using a rock in a hat instead of the gold plates to translate the Book of Mormon is not a useful truth?

Elder Packer probably didn’t think so at the time, no. I think he was wrong about that, and I think the Church has recognized that mistake. That’s why [Elder Ballard’s recent talk to a similar audience of CES employees](#) takes the opposite approach to Elder Packer’s. This time around, Elder Ballard counseled them to know all the details of the recent gospel topics essays “like the back of your hand” in order to be able to provide true and useful information that allows the Church to get out in front of these controversial issues. And, yes, that includes your beloved rock in a hat.

The fact that there are multiple conflicting First Vision accounts is not a useful truth?

I think it would be useful to demonstrate the truth that the accounts don’t actually conflict.

The fact that Joseph Smith was involved in Polyandry when D&C 132:61 condemns it as “adultery” is not a useful truth?

No, because it’s not a truth. Joseph Smith wasn’t involved in polyandry. (Sealings, not marriage, no sex.) It would be useful, however, for CES instructors to point out the true reasons why this charge you continually repeat is not accurate.

He continues:

“That historian or scholar who delights in pointing out the weaknesses and frailties of present or past leaders destroys faith. A destroyer of faith – particularly one within the Church, and more particularly one who is employed specifically to build faith – places himself in great spiritual jeopardy.”

Again, this is not the way I’d teach this principle, but Elder Packer is entirely correct here. Look at the verb he uses – “delights.” It’s one thing for a historian or scholar to acknowledge or plainly state the “weaknesses and frailties of present or past leaders,” especially if they do so in context and with an appropriate sense of balance. It’s another thing to “delight” in discussing those weaknesses above all else, as such an approach will paint a distorted picture of reality and, yes, destroy faith. It also would, indeed, place someone in spiritual jeopardy, as they would destroy their own faith, too.

Right, because being honest to members about Joseph's "weaknesses and frailties" of secretly marrying other men's wives while denying and lying about it to everyone for 10+ years just might destroy faith.

Again, this statement is neither true nor useful. Joseph did not secretly marry other men's wives.

But let's not teach this historical fact because "some things that are true are not very useful."

I'd prefer we not teach it because it's not a historical fact.

What's interesting about Packer's above quote is that he's focusing on history from the point of view that a historian is only interested in the "weaknesses and frailties of present and past leaders." Historians are also interested in things like how the Book of Mormon got translated or how many accounts Joseph gave about the foundational First Vision or whether the Book of Abraham even matches the papyri and facsimiles.

Sure. That's fine. Historians should be interested in such things. CES Employees have a different responsibility than professional historians. Should a CES instructor "delight" in focusing solely on controversies surrounding those other issues and not the whole picture, they would not be fulfilling their purpose, and they would be destroying their own faith and the faith of their students.

Besides, it matters in the religious context what past and present leaders "weaknesses and frailties" are.

I think you're absolutely right. Key word there is "context." Elder Packer is talking about Church employees who "delight" in taking things out of context in order to focus on the weaknesses and ignore the strengths.

If Joseph's public position was that adultery and polygamy are morally wrong and condemned by God, what does it say about him and his character that he did exactly that in the dark while lying to Emma and everyone else about it?

Thank you for providing an illustration of my previous point. This question represents a perfect example of taking something out of context in order to focus on the weaknesses and ignore the strengths.

How is this not a useful truth?

It is not a useful truth because it is false. But it seems to be, for you, usefully false.

A relevant hypothetical example: President Monson gets caught with child pornography on his hard drive.

Relevant? I doubt it. I can think of few things that would be more unlikely.

This matters, especially in light of his current position, status, and teachings on morality. Just

because a leader wears a religious hat does not follow that they're exempt from history and accountability from others.

I think it would matter a great deal, yes.

The question should not be whether it's faith promoting or not to share ugly but truthful facts. The question should be: Is the right thing to do? Is it the honest thing to do?

In your hypothetical, the right and honest thing to do would be to call the police and have President Monson arrested. Few things are viler in the eyes of the Lord than using ecclesiastical influence to assault the innocence of a child. As I mentioned previously, that's a truth that the Spirit confirmed to me while I was watching an R-rated movie.

Do you truly think President Monson is depraved enough to have child pornography on his hard drive?

Criticizing leaders:

- Dallin H. Oaks made the following disturbing comment in the PBS documentary, ["The Mormons"](#) (0:51):

"It is wrong to criticize the leaders of the Church, even if the criticism is true."

The full quote here is helpful:

*"I also said something else that has excited people: that it's wrong to criticize leaders of the Church, even if the criticism is true, because it diminishes their effectiveness as a servant of the Lord. **One can work to correct them by some other means**, but don't go about saying that they misbehaved when they were a youngster or whatever."* [Emphasis added]

As with Elder Packer's statement, this is something I wish Elder Oaks hadn't said, as it, too, is open to misinterpretation. In addition, the snippet you link to is a sort of "preview of coming attractions" for the next episode of the series, so in that footage, the one sentence gets yanked out of any surrounding context and is even more susceptible to being misunderstood.

His point is not, as many critics imply, that the church does not tolerate disagreement. It is that public criticism, especially that which is focused on how they "misbehaved as a youngster or whatever," is the wrong way to handle disagreements. One should "work to correct them by some other means" other than publicly embarrassing leaders, especially on irrelevant points that are discussed solely with the intent to embarrass.

This is actually a Biblical principle. "Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault **between thee and him alone**: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother." (Matthew 18:15, emphasis added)

Researching "unapproved" materials on the internet:

Elder Quentin L. Cook made the following comment in the [October 2012](#) Conference:

“Some have immersed themselves in internet materials that magnify, exaggerate, and in some cases invent shortcomings of early Church leaders. Then they draw incorrect conclusions that can affect testimony. Any who have made these choices can repent and be spiritually renewed.”

Why do you put the word “unapproved” in quotes? Elder Cook didn’t use that word or anything like it. His counsel – don’t “immerse” yourself in materials that provide distorted or false information – is good counsel. Do you advocate immersion in materials that provide distorted or false information?

Elder Dieter Uchtdorf said the following in his CES talk “What is truth” (33:00):

“...Remember that in this age of information there are many who create doubt about anything and everything at any time and every place. You will find even those who still claim that they have evidence that the earth is flat. That the moon is a hologram. It looks like it a little bit. And that certain movie stars are really aliens from another planet. And it is always good to keep in mind just because something is printed on paper, appears on the internet, is frequently repeated or has a powerful group of followers doesn't make it true.”

With which part of this entirely reasonable, common-sense statement do you disagree? And why do you cite this as evidence that the Church is cracking down on “unapproved” materials when President Uchtdorf doesn’t use that word or anything like it?

Who cares whether you received the information from a stranger, television, book, magazine, comic book, napkin, and even the scary internet?

Certainly not Elder Cook or President Uchtdorf in the quotes you cite. There is no counsel here to avoid any medium of information; the counsel is to make sure that information is true, regardless of where it is found.

You repeatedly use the phrase “scary Internet,” as if that phrase represents the mindset of the Brethren. It doesn’t.

“We are blessed to live, learn, and serve in this most remarkable dispensation. An important aspect of the fulness that is available to us in this special season is a miraculous progression of innovations and inventions that have enabled and accelerated the work of salvation: from trains to telegraphs to radios to automobiles to airplanes to telephones to transistors to televisions to computers to satellite transmissions to the Internet—and to an almost endless list of technologies and tools that bless our lives. All of these advancements are part of the Lord hastening His work in the latter days.”

- Elder David A. Bednar, [To Sweep the Earth](#), BYU Education Week 2014

“Whatever the question is, if we need more information, we search it online. In seconds we have a lot of material. This is marvelous. The Internet provides many opportunities for learning.”

- [If Ye Lack Wisdom](#), by Marcos A. Aidukaitis (First Quorum of the Seventy), April 2014 General Conference

“You live in a world where technological advances occur at an astounding pace. It is difficult for many of my generation to keep up with the possibilities. Depending on how technology is used, these advances can be a blessing or a deterrent. Technology, when understood and used for righteous purposes, need not be a threat but rather an enhancement to spiritual communication.”

[-For Peace At Home](#), by Richard G. Scott (Quorum of the Twelve Apostles). April 2013 General Conference

And on it goes. You are making an accusation that your citations don't in any way support.

Elder Neil Andersen made the following statement in the [October 2014 General Conference](#) specifically targeting the medium of the Internet in a bizarre attempt to discredit the Internet as a reliable source for getting factual and truthful information:

“We might remind the sincere inquirer that Internet information does not have a ‘truth’ filter. Some information, no matter how convincing, is simply not true.”

How is this “specifically targeting the medium of the Internet?” It's specifically targeting information that is not true. In the same talk, Elder Andersen mentions false information that appeared in Time Magazine. Are we to interpret that as Elder Andersen specifically targeting Time Magazine? I don't think so.

With all this talk from General Authorities against the scary internet

You've provided no examples of “talk from General Authorities against the scary internet.”

and daring to be balanced by looking at what both defenders and critics are saying about the Church,

You've provided no examples of General Authorities counseling anyone to avoid “looking at what both defenders and critics are saying about the Church.”

it is as if questioning and researching and doubting is now the new pornography.

You've provided no examples of General Authorities saying anything that would justify this ridiculous analogy.

Truth has no fear of the light.

Agreed. Which is why General Authorities are encouraging members to seek truth and not falsehood in the statements you've provided.

President George A. Smith said, “If a faith will not bear to be investigated; if its preachers and professors are afraid to have it examined, their foundation must be very weak.”

Correct. You've provided no examples of General Authorities discouraging investigation of their

faith.

Under Cook's counsel, FairMormon and unofficial LDS apologetic websites are anti-Mormon sources that should be avoided.

That's like saying "the sky is green." Elder Cook said nothing that could possibly be tortured into meaning this.

Not only do they introduce to Mormons "internet materials that magnify, exaggerate, and in some cases invent shortcomings of early Church leaders"

Elder Cook's verb was "immersed," not "introduce." Big, big difference. FairMormon does not immerse people in material that magnifies, exaggerates, or invents shortcomings of early Church leaders.

but they provide many ridiculous answers with logical fallacies and omissions while leaving members confused and hanging with a bizarre version of Mormonism.

We'll just have to agree to disagree on that one. The logical fallacies and omissions that have piled up in the CES Letter give this accusation a "mote v. beam" vibe.

What about the disturbing information about early Church leaders and the Church which are not magnified, or exaggerated, or invented?

What about it? All the statements you cite here encourage people to seek truth and not falsehood. We have nothing to fear from truth, no matter where it's found.

What about the disturbing facts that didn't come from the flat-earthers or moon-hologramers but instead from the Church itself?

[Elder Ballard's recent talk](#) insists that you should learn as much as you possibly can about them.

"Church leaders today are fully conscious of the unlimited access to information, and we are making extraordinary efforts to provide accurate context and understanding of the teachings of the Restoration. A prime example of this effort is the 11 Gospel Topics essays on LDS.org that provide balanced and reliable interpretations of the facts for controversial and unfamiliar Church-related subjects.

It is important that you know the content in these essays like you know the back of your hand. If you have questions about them, then please ask someone who has studied them and understands them. In other words, "seek learning, even by study and also by faith" as you master the content of these essays.

You should also become familiar with the Joseph Smith Papers website and the Church history section on LDS.org and other resources by faithful LDS scholars.

The effort for gospel transparency and spiritual inoculation through a thoughtful study of doctrine and history, coupled with a burning testimony, is the best antidote we have to help

students avoid and/or deal with questions, doubt, or faith crises they may face in this information age.”

- M. Russell Ballard, “The Opportunities and Responsibilities of CES Teachers in the 21st Century,” February 26, 2016

Are those facts invalid when someone discovers them on the scary internet?

No, and, again, no General Authority has ever referred to the “scary internet.”

What happens when a member comes across Elder Russell M. Nelson’s obscure [1992 talk](#) or the Church’s December 2013 [Book of Mormon Translation](#) essay where they learn – for the first time in their lives – that the Book of Mormon was not translated as depicted in Sunday Schools, Ensigns, MTC, General Conference addresses, or Visitor Centers?

Depends on the person, I guess. You and I certainly reacted differently. In any case, we’re about to find out, as the Church is making a concerted effort to get this information in front of as many members as possible.

Is this member in need of repentance when he’s troubled by this inconsistency and deception?

I wasn’t, as I didn’t consider it inconsistency and deception. And no General Authority said that doubts make anyone in need of repentance.

Is it the member’s fault for discovering the Book of Mormon translation deception still perpetuated by the Church?

This is a “when did you stop beating your wife” sort of question. It is not axiomatic that people who learn about the infamous rock in the hat will assume that it is a “translation deception still perpetuated by the Church.”

Why is the member required to repent for coming to the conclusion that something is very wrong?

I think the Church is confident that if members get all the facts and context, they won’t come to that conclusion.

Most of the information I discovered and confirmed online about the Church is found from Church friendly sources. I confirmed Joseph’s polygamy/polyandry from LDS- owned FamilySearch.org.

Except you have woefully distorted and misinterpreted that information. Joseph was not engaged in polyandry. Sealings, not marriage, no sex.

I confirmed Adam-God theory and other doctrines taught by Brigham Young from the Journal of Discourses.

And you have interpreted that information in the worst possible light by ignoring how this anomalous theory fits in a broader historical context.

I confirmed Nelson's rock in the hat endorsement from his 1992 talk buried on LDS.org.

What rock in what hat?

Even reading the scriptures and seeing all its problems can cause members to question and doubt.

Of course. That's why [President Uchtdorf said](#), "It's natural to have questions—the acorn of honest inquiry has often sprouted and matured into a great oak of understanding. There are few members of the Church who, at one time or another, have not wrestled with serious or sensitive questions. One of the purposes of the Church is to nurture and cultivate the seed of faith—even in the sometimes sandy soil of doubt and uncertainty."

If it wasn't for the internet, I'd still find the information from physical books. Like the internet, books contain positive and negative as well as true and false information about the Church and everything else on earth. Are physical books to be avoided as well?

No. And neither is the Internet. That's why no General Authority has ever counseled people to avoid the Internet.

"And it is always good to keep in mind just because something is printed on paper, appears on the internet, is frequently repeated or has a powerful group of followers doesn't make it true." The exact same thing can be said of Mormonism and LDS.org.

Yes. The exact same thing can be said of any information found anywhere.

Going after members who publish or share their questions, concerns, and doubts:

September Six:

"The September Six were six members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints who were excommunicated or disfellowshipped by the Church in September 1993, allegedly for publishing scholarly work on Mormonism or critiquing Church doctrine or leadership."

Who are you quoting?

I find it telling that to illustrate the idea the Church routinely goes after members who "publish or share their questions, concerns, and doubts," you have to reach back more than 22 years to find actual examples. If this really were an ongoing practice or concern, surely there'd be a great deal more support for your allegation.

In any case, the September Six are now the September Four, as two of these scholars have rejoined the Church in full fellowship. They continue to function as both scholars and faithful members of the Church.

A few months before the September Six, Boyd K. Packer made the following comment regarding the three "enemies" of the Church:

"The dangers I speak of come from the gay-lesbian movement, the feminist movement (both of

which are relatively new), and the ever-present challenge from the so-called scholars or intellectuals.”

– [Boyd K. Packer, All-Church Coordinating Council, May 18, 1993](#)

You’re insinuating that Elder Packer ordered these excommunications, but there is no evidence that this is true, despite 22 years of innuendo to that effect. Even if Elder Packer was engaged in a systematic crackdown on Mormon scholars, you’d think that he’d have more than six excommunications to his credit over the course over 22 years.

Strengthening the Church Members Committee (SCMC):
The spying and monitoring arm of the Church.

That’s rather melodramatic.

It is secretive

Indeed! So secretive that the First Presidency issued a public statement affirming its existence and purpose in the Church News in 1992.

Here’s the statement.

First Presidency statement cites scriptural mandate for Church committee
Generally, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints does not respond to criticism levied against its work. But in light of extensive publicity recently given to false accusations of so-called secret Church committees and files, the First Presidency has issued the following statement:

"The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was established in 1830 following the appearance of God the Father and Jesus Christ to the Prophet Joseph Smith in upstate New York. This sacred event heralded the onset of the promised 'restitution of all things.' Many instructions were subsequently given to the Prophet including Section 123 of the Doctrine and Covenants:"
`And again, we would suggest for your consideration the propriety of all the saints gathering up a knowledge of all the facts, and sufferings and abuses put upon them. . . .

" `And also of all the property and amount of damages which they have sustained, both of character and personal injuries. . . .

" `And also the names of all persons that have had a hand in their oppressions, as far as they can get hold of them and find them out.

" `And perhaps a committee can be appointed to find out these things, and to take statements and affidavits; and also to gather up the libelous publications that are afloat;

" `And all that are in the magazines, and in the encyclopedias, and all the libelous histories that are published...(Verses 1-5.)'

"Leaders and members of the Church strive to implement commandments of the Lord including this direction received in 1839. Because the Church has a non-professional clergy, its stake

presidents and bishops have varied backgrounds and training. In order to assist their members who have questions, these local leaders often request information from General Authorities of the Church.

"The Strengthening Church Members Committee was appointed by the First Presidency to help fulfill this need and to comply with the cited section of the Doctrine and Covenants. This committee serves as a resource to priesthood leaders throughout the world who may desire assistance on a wide variety of topics. It is a General Authority committee, currently comprised of Elder James E. Faust and Elder Russell M. Nelson of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. They work through established priesthood channels, and neither impose nor direct Church disciplinary action.

"Members who have questions concerning Church doctrine, policies, or procedures have been counseled to discuss those concerns confidentially with their local leaders. These leaders are deeply aware of their obligation to counsel members wisely in the spirit of love, in order to strengthen their faith in the Lord and in His great latter-day work."

- The First Presidency

and most members have been unaware of its existence since its creation in 1985 after President Ezra Taft Benson took over.

Actually, it looks like various versions of this committee have been around since Section 123 of the Doctrine and Covenants was received in 1839.

Elder Jeffrey R. Holland admitted it still exists (2:29) in March 2012.

The transcript of that admission:

John Sweeney: What is the Strengthening Church Members Committee?

Elder Holland: The Strengthening Church Members Committee was born some years ago to protect against predatory practices of polygamists.

Sweeney: I asked what it is, not was

Holland: That is what it is...

Sweeney: So it does still exist?

Holland: It does still exist...it does still exist...

Sweeney: And it.... looks at....it's there to defend the church against polygamists?

Holland: Principally, that is still its principal task.

Sweeney: So what is its subsidiary task?

Holland: I just.... suppose to.... to be protective generally, just to watch and to care for any insidious influence. But for all intents and purposes, that's all that I know about it....is that it's primarily there to guard against polygamy. That would be the substantial part of the work. I'm not on that committee so I don't know much about it.

The historical evidence and the September Six points to SCMC's primary mission being to hunt and expose intellectuals and/or disaffected members who are influencing other members to think and question, despite Holland's claim that it's a committee primarily to fight against polygamy.

Then it should be a simple task for you to provide that historical evidence, which you don't.

“When the prophet speaks the debate is over”:

N. Eldon Tanner, 1st Counselor in the First Presidency, gave a First Presidency Message in the August 1979 Ensign that includes the following statement:

“When the prophet speaks the debate is over.”

In practice, he's absolutely correct. The Church does not function as a democracy. Members do not debate and vote on doctrines or policies, and we do not change doctrines or policies by debating our prophets, who ultimately have the final say on such things.

This reminds me of President George Albert Smith, who responded to the false statement that “when the Prophet speaks, the thinking has been done” that I referenced earlier. (WAY WAY earlier. This thing is up to well over 100,000 words now. Sheesh!) Let me requote President Smith's response to the earlier statement. This will only be a second requote, so there's no need to drag Stephen Burnett back into this.

The leaflet to which you refer, and from which you quote in your letter, was not “prepared” by “one of our leaders.” However, one or more of them inadvertently permitted the paragraph to pass uncensored. By their so doing, not a few members of the Church have been upset in their feelings, and General Authorities have been embarrassed.

I am pleased to assure you that you are right in your attitude that the passage quoted does not express the true position of the Church. Even to imply that members of the Church are not to do their own thinking is grossly to misrepresent the true ideal of the Church... [which] gives to every man his free agency, and admonishes him always to use the reason and good judgment with which God has blessed him.

Granted, the two statements are not exactly the same idea, but this principle is important to remember as we try to make sense of what President Tanner is saying. Because saying “the debate is over” is not the same thing as saying “the prophet is never wrong.” We do not believe in infallible prophets. To the extent that anyone did or does, including even a good and wise man like N. Eldon Tanner, they are incorrect.

Some things that are true are not very useful

Which you misinterpret.

+ It is wrong to criticize leaders of the Church, even if the criticism is true

Which you also misinterpret.

+ Spying and monitoring on members

Which is a gross distortion.

+ Intellectuals are dangerous

“So-called intellectuals” was the phrase Elder Packer used. He was making to those dissidents who hide behind intellectual credentials. The Church adores faithful intellectuals. What was the mighty Hugh Nibley if not an intellectual?

+ When the prophet speaks the debate is over

We just covered this.

+ Obedience is the First Law of Heaven

That’s an ancient biblical principle. What’s wrong with it?

= Policies and practices you’d expect to find in a totalitarian system such as North Korea or George Orwell’s 1984; not from the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Funny you should mention 1984. I recently re-watched the John Hurt/Richard Burton film adaptation of that seminal work. (And yes, it was an R-rated movie.) My memory is fresh enough to recognize this as a ridiculously hyperbolic comparison. At what point have Church leaders set up video monitoring screens in all members houses to enforce orthodoxy under threat of torture by means of a bucket of rats attached to their faces until they publicly confess to non-existent crimes?

The North Korea comparison is equally absurd. Were the September Six sentenced to Mormon gulags where they were worked and starved to death? Are rank-and-file members hauled off to such camps when they take down the framed pictures of Thomas S. Monson that they are required by law to have on display in their homes at all times?

As a believing member, I was deeply offended by the accusation that the Church was a cult. “How can it be a cult when we’re good people who are following Christ, focusing on family, and doing good works in and out of a church that bears His name? When we’re 14 million members? What a ridiculous accusation.” It was only after I lost my testimony and discovering, for the first time, the SCMC and the anti-intellectualism going on behind the scenes that I could clearly see the above cultish aspects of the Church and why people came to the conclusion that Mormonism is a cult.

The word “cult” is objectively meaningless. It used to have reference to any religion and was essentially a measure of size – i.e. a cult is “a small group of religious followers.” In today’s vernacular, though, the word “cult” is reserved for spurious or unorthodox religions that deserve scorn and ridicule. People who throw the word “cult” around with regularity and think they’re saying something factual are simply telling you which religions they don’t like.

The best and most useful definition of “cult” came from my brilliant high school government teacher, Lee Shagin, who put it thusly:

“A cult is someone else’s religion.”

Dr. Walter Martin, arguably the most influentially vitriolic critic of the LDS Church in the 20th Century, wrote a book titled “The Kingdom of the Cults” in which he derided several different groups that went afoul of his thinking of what Christianity ought to be. However, in order to begin mudslinging at all the cults he despised, he had to have an ironclad definition of same to anchor the discussion.

The problem was that every part of Martin’s definition could also be applied to early Christianity. All cults, according to Martin, follow a charismatic leader and insist that they’re the only way to heaven. They require sacrifices; they have their own vocabulary. Sounds like he’s describing all those folks following Jesus of Nazareth circa 33 AD. Martin spewed an awful lot of words in an attempt to clarify what a cult is, but ultimately, Lee Shagin’s definition is the better one.

In any case, the way you’re using the word “cult” in connection with 1984 and North Korea suggests you see the Church as some kind of prison that wreaks great havoc on dissidents. But that’s demonstrably nonsense. The fact is that the Church welcomes all, and it also allows all to leave.

This is no totalitarian state; you’re not going to get shot on your way out. As soon as you resign your membership, a simple process that only requires a single letter to your bishop, you will be free and clear. No one will follow you; no one will spy on you, and no one will punish you. Even your home teacher will leave you alone.

There is the likelihood, however, that your Mormon friends and family will still love and care for you and pray on your behalf, but, alas, such kindness can’t really be stopped.

Conclusion:

Oh, thank heaven.

“Mormonism, as it is called, must stand or fall on the story of Joseph Smith. He was either a Prophet of God, divinely called, properly appointed and commissioned or he was one of the biggest frauds this world has ever seen. There is no middle ground. If Joseph was a deceiver, who willfully attempted to mislead people, then he should be exposed, his claims should be refuted, and his doctrines shown to be false...”

– President Joseph Fielding Smith

Amen and amen.

When I first discovered that Joseph Smith used a rock in a hat to translate the Book of Mormon,
Play it again, Sam.

that he was married to 11 other men's wives,

All together now: Sealings, not marriages, no sex.

and that the Book of Abraham has absolutely nothing to do with the papyri or facsimiles...

How can the Book of Abraham have nothing to do with the facsimiles? They *are* the Book of Abraham.

I went into a panic. I desperately needed answers and I needed them 3 hours ago. Among the first sources I looked to for answers were official Church sources such as Mormon.org and LDS.org. I couldn't find them.

I then went to FairMormon and Neal A. Maxwell Institute (formerly FARMS).

FairMormon and these unofficial apologists have done more to destroy my testimony than any anti- Mormon source ever could. I found their version of Mormonism to be alien and foreign to the Chapel Mormonism that I grew up in attending Church, Seminary, reading Scriptures, General Conferences, EFY, mission, and BYU. Their answers are not only contradictory to the scriptures and teachings I learned through correlated Mormonism...they're truly bizarre.

I was amazed to learn that, according to these unofficial apologists, translate doesn't really mean translate, horses aren't really horses (they're tapirs), chariots aren't really chariots (since tapirs can't pull chariots without wheels), steel isn't really steel, Hill Cumorah isn't really in New York (it's possibly in Mesoamerica), Lamanites aren't really the principal ancestors of the Native American Indians, marriage isn't really marriage (if they're Joseph's marriages? They're just mostly non-sexual spiritual sealings),

Hey! There it is! My last "sealings, not marriages, no sex" finally paid off!

Sorry. I'll let you conclude without further interruption, unless you mention the rock in the hat again.

and prophets aren't really prophets (only when they're heretics teaching today's false doctrine).

Why is it that I had to first discover all of this – from the internet – at 31-years-old after 20 years of high activity in the Church? I wasn't just a seat warmer at Church. I've read the scriptures several times. I've read hundreds of "approved" Church books. I was an extremely dedicated missionary who voluntarily asked to stay longer in the mission field. I was very interested in and dedicated to the gospel.

How am I supposed to feel about learning about these disturbing facts at 31-years-old? After making critical life decisions based on trust and faith that the Church was telling me the complete truth about its origins and history? After many books, Seminary, EFY, Church history tour, mission, BYU, General Conferences, Scriptures, Ensigns, and regular Church attendance?

So, putting aside the absolute shock and feeling of betrayal in learning about all of this information that has been kept concealed and hidden from me by the Church my entire life, I am now expected to go back to the drawing board. Somehow, I'm supposed to rebuild my testimony on new discovered information that is not only bizarre and alien to the Chapel Mormonism I had a testimony of; it's almost comical.

I'm now supposed to believe that Joseph has the credibility of translating ancient records when the Book of Abraham and the Kinderhook Plates destroy this claim? That Joseph has the character and integrity to take him at his word after seeing his deliberate deception in hiding and denying polygamy and polyandry for at least 10 years of his adult life? How he backdated and retrofitted the Aaronic and Melchizedek Priesthood restoration events as if they were in the Book of Commandments all along? And I'm supposed to believe with a straight face that Joseph using a rock in a hat is totally legit? Despite this being the exact same method he used to con people out of their money during his treasure hunting days? Despite this ruining the official story of ancient prophets and Moroni investing all that time and effort into gold plates, which were not used because Joseph's face was stuffed in a hat?

(At least you didn't mention the rock. Sorry. Continue.)

I'm supposed to sweep under the rug the inconsistent and contradictory First Vision accounts and just believe anyway? I'm supposed to believe that these men who have been wrong about so many important things and who have not prophesied, seered, or revealed much in the last 169 or so years are to be sustained as "prophets, seers, and revelators"?

I'm supposed to believe the scriptures have credibility after endorsing so much rampant immorality, violence, and despicable behavior? When it says that the earth is only 7,000 years old and that there was no death before then? Or that Heavenly Father is sitting on a throne with an erect penis when all evidence points to it really being the pagan Egyptian god of sex, Min? The "most correct book on earth" Book of Mormon going through over 100,000 changes over the years? After going through so many revisions and still being incorrect? Noah's ark and the global flood are literal events? Tower of Babel is a literal event? The Book of Mormon containing 1769 King James Version edition translation errors and 1611 King James Version translators' italics while claiming to be an ancient record?

That there's actually a polygamous god who revealed a Warren Jeffs style revelation on polygamy that Joseph pointed to as a perverted license to secretly marry other living men's wives and teenage girls barely out of puberty? That this crazy god actually threatened Joseph's life with one of his angels with a sword if a newly married pregnant woman didn't agree to Joseph's marriage proposal? And like the part-time racist schizophrenic god, I'm supposed to believe in a god who was against polygamy before he was for polygamy but decided in 1890 that he was again against it?

I'm told to put these foundational problems on the shelf and wait until I die to get answers? To stop looking at the Church intellectually even though the "glory of God is intelligence"? Ignore and have faith anyway?

I'm sorry, but faith is believing and hoping when there is little evidence for or against something. Delusion is believing when there is an abundance of evidence against something. To me, it's absolute insanity to bet my life, my precious time, my money, my heart, and my mind into an organization that has so many serious problematic challenges to its foundational truth claims.

There are just way too many problems. We're not just talking about one issue here. We're talking about dozens of serious issues that undermine the very foundation of the LDS Church and its truth claims.

The past year was the worst year of my life. I experienced a betrayal, loss, and sadness unlike anything I've ever known. "Do what is right; let the consequence follow" now holds a completely different meaning for me. I desperately searched for answers to all of the problems. To me, the answer eventually came but it was not what I expected...or hoped for.

As a child, it seemed so simple;
Every step was clearly marked.
Priesthood, mission, sweetheart, temple;
Bright with hope I soon embarked.
But now I have become a man,
And doubt the promise of the plan.

For the path is growing steeper,
And a slip could mean my death.
Plunging upward, ever deeper,
I can barely catch my breath.
Oh, where within this untamed wild
Is the star that led me as a child?

As I crest the shadowed mountain,
I embrace the endless sky;
The expanse of heaven's fountain
Now unfolds before my eye.
A thousand stars shine on the land,
The chart drafted by my own hand.

– The Journey –

Jeremy T. Runnells

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Well spoken, Jeremy. As of this writing, you and I have never met, but I hope that changes at some point. I have tremendous respect for your integrity and honesty, even though it has led you outside the boundaries of the Church.

I don't know if anything I've written here will be remotely helpful or persuasive. It breaks my heart that you reached out for information and found nothing to strengthen your faith. But if one person reads this response and is helped the way I was when I read "The Truth About the Godmakers" all those years ago, then this will have been time well spent.

I remember my own feeling of panic when I bumped into the weird Church that "The Godmakers" was telling me was my own. I think, however, that I was coming at it from a different angle. The premise of "The Godmakers" wasn't so much that it was all a fraud so much as that it was a Satanic deception, and that being a Mormon would consign to an eternal hell because I wasn't really a Christian.

I can remember on my mission coming across many evangelical Christians who condemned me to hell unless I was willing to accept Jesus into my life. Invariably, I would use the opportunity to, then and there, accept Jesus into my life. I would say whatever little prayer they had printed on their cards or flyers and then look them in the eye and say I agreed with every word in it. It still wasn't enough. I remember talking to one family at their doorstep, who said I needed to accept Jesus as my personal Lord and Savior.

"Fair enough," I said. "I cheerfully accept Jesus Christ as my personal Lord and Savior. I recognize that I am helpless without Him, and that He is the Way, the Truth and the Life. I invite him into my life, and I know He is the only way to heaven."

They stood there, flummoxed.

"Is that it?" I said. "Do I have to do anything else?"

"Yes, you do," the mother said. "You need to repent of your Mormon faith."

Yeah, okay.

See, that's the problem. These guys insist that all you have to do is accept Jesus, and, presto, you're saved. But if you say you accept Jesus and still want to hang with the Mormons, you didn't do it right. If you press people hard enough on this, they'll tell you haven't really accepted Jesus, you've accepted some other Jesus. The Godmakers constantly refers to Jesus as being separate from the guy the Mormons worship, who is repeatedly identified as the "Mormon Jesus." The problem is that the Mormon Jesus is pretty much identical to the other Jesus – he was the Son of God, born to a virgin in Bethlehem; he grew up in Nazareth; he called twelve apostles and taught the Gospel, and then was betrayed and crucified on Calvary. Three days later, He rose from the dead, and He commissioned His apostles to teach his Gospel to all the world. Now, unless the Mormon Jesus did all this same stuff down the street or something, it's pretty hard to distinguish between the two.

The problem is that Mormons believe Jesus did more than this. The Book of Mormon tells of His visit to the Lost Tribes of Israel, and Joseph Smith and other modern prophets talk of seeing Jesus on several occasions. So what these Christians are saying is that Jesus only did what is chronicled in the New Testament, and only the Mormon Jesus did all this extra, weird stuff.

So, when you get right down to it, the way to hell isn't a lack of belief in Jesus. Apparently, the danger lies in believing too much about Jesus.

I'm not quite sure what to do about this. I can go into almost any Christian church in the country, and they'll tell me things about Jesus that I will heartily agree with. I believe He did everything the Bible says He did. But I also believe Jesus is more than just words on a page. I don't worship the Bible; I worship Jesus, who is not bound like the pages of a book.

I can recall quite vividly one of the first experiences I had that built my own personal witness of Jesus Christ. I was in a pageant at the Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles called III Nephi, which dramatized Christ's visit to the New World after His resurrection. I was nine or ten years old, I think. I played one of the children who greets the Savior, and we were taught two songs to sing on that occasion – one was "I Feel My Savior's Love," and the other was "The Love of God." I can recall feeling a very powerful witness that Jesus was real; that He loved me, and that He knew me by name. I can remember a testimony meeting right after the dress rehearsal, where one of the men stood up and said "That which you feel right now is the love of God." He was right. I knew he was telling the truth, just as surely and plainly as I knew I existed.

The song "I Feel My Savior's Love" was written for that pageant, and it has since become something of a staple among Mormon children. I've heard it a billion times. But I hadn't heard the song "The Love of God" since the day I last sang it on the stage of the Shrine. That is, until one Easter stake conference, when the stake choir sang it as a counterpoint to "I Know that My Redeemer Lives." And instantly, I felt that same sweet assurance, the power of the Spirit reminding me of the certainty I learned so long ago.

That which I felt was the love of God.

Maybe that means I'm damned for all eternity. Maybe the Mormon Jesus has deceived me. Maybe, maybe, maybe – but I really don't think so. There are some things that sink too deeply into your soul to deny them.

I recognize that much of what I believe is too foreign or alien to you, and I think think the best point you make in your letter has to do with the idea of prophetic infallibility. We do a massive disservice to people by implying that the Church is perfect, that prophets never err, and that it's faithless to recognize that nobody gets their agency extracted, not even prophets. Discipleship required us to be patient enough with an imperfect church that we were willing to endure error in order to sustain leaders who, unlike a perfect Christ, have weaknesses and blind spots and therefore actually need to be sustained.

And isn't that a better story anyway? Isn't it better to imagine a church that develops and grows and learns from its mistakes?

That's the story, incidentally, that the Lord has always expected us to tell. I don't think that people who stand up in a testimony meeting to praise this as "the only true church" realize that

they're misquoting the Lord, who never actually said that. What he did say was this was the only true and *living* church. (See D&C 1:30) Plenty of other churches have truth in them. Some have gobs of it. But this church is both true and *living*. It is more than just correct principles; it is the living people doing everything in their power to apply them. And the Church, like all living things, develops, grows, and learns from its mistakes.

I don't say that to be critical. I love the Church. I love its doctrines, which provide a cohesive and glorious vision of the universe that has no equal in the other religions and philosophies of the world. But I also love the Church in practice, which has repeatedly come to my rescue, temporally and spiritually.

I will always be grateful for a ward that rallied around my family when my oldest daughter injured her spinal chord in a skiing accident and was left partially paralyzed. They organized a massive, successful fundraiser that covered most of our more-than-significant medical expenses, and they assembled a team of thirty-or-so people who came into our house and scrubbed it from top to bottom. They also fixed broken cabinets, replaced damaged electrical wiring, and installed a new kitchen sink, three new toilets, an entire handicapped-accessible bathroom, and double railings on two stairwells and in our front and back entrances.

Their main focus, however, was completely redecorating my daughter's bedroom, which now includes an entirely new bedframe and bedding, new furniture, a fresh coat of paint, and a beautiful mural of a flowering tree just above her bed. And just to make sure that my other daughter didn't feel left out, they entirely redid her room just for good measure, installing a built-in new window seat at the base of her bed.

None of that has any bearing on whether the Book of Abraham is an accurate translation or not, but I think it's important not to lose sight of what the Church really is on a practical, day-to-day level. On the whole, it makes bad people good and good people better.

This church is also transformative because people have had a genuine, powerful experience with Jesus Christ, often through the Book of Mormon. I have seen, firsthand, what the power of Christ can do, and I have encountered God in this Church in an intimate, personal, and undeniable way. I don't think those kinds of spiritual experiences require me to abandon reason or stop asking questions, but they keep me from panicking the next time I hear an accusation against Joseph Smith or the Church that I've never heard before.

I have found God in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and I pray you find Him wherever your faith journey takes you.

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