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Abstract Review of "The Priority of Mosiah: A Prelude to Book of Mormon Exegesis" (1993), by Brent Lee Metcalfe; "Historical Criticism and the Book of Mormon: A Personal Encounter" (2002), by Edwin Firmage Jr.; and "Secret Things, Hidden Things: The Seer Story in the Imaginative Economy of Joseph Smith" (2002), by Susan Staker.

Positivism and the Priority of Ideology in Mosiah-First Theories of Book of Mormon Production

Alan Goff

> Every vision of history functions as a specific lens or optic that a theorist employs to illuminate some facet of human reality. Each perspective is both enabling, allowing a strongly focused study, and limiting, preventing consideration of other perspectives.[1]

1. Steven Best, *The Politics of Historical Vision: Marx, Foucault, Habermas* (New York: Guilford, 1995), 255.

Review of Brent Lee Metcalfe. "The Priority of Mosiah: A Prelude to Book of Mormon Exegesis." In *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon: Explorations in Critical Methodology,* ed. Brent Lee Metcalfe, 395–444. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993. xiv + 446 pages. $26.95.

Review of Edwin Firmage Jr. "Historical Criticism and the Book of Mormon: A Personal Encounter." In *American Apocrypha: Essays on the Book of Mormon,* ed. Dan Vogel and Brent Lee Metcalfe, 1–16. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002. xvii + 369 pages. $21.95.

Review of Susan Staker. "Secret Things, Hidden Things: The Seer Story in the Imaginative Economy of Joseph Smith." In *American Apocrypha: Essays on the Book of Mormon,* ed. Dan Vogel and Brent Lee Metcalfe, 235–74. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002. xvii + 369 pages. $21.95.

> One of the things one learns from the study of history is that such study is never innocent, ideologically or otherwise.[2]

Billy Collins, former U.S. Poet Laureate, writes a wonderful poem about "The History Teacher."[3] Not wanting to disturb the tender sensibilities of his students who after school are assaulting and manhandling each other, he softens the impact of the hard lessons of history. Among other topics, the historian teaches his students that "the Ice Age was really just / the Chilly Age," a time cold enough to require sweaters. The Spanish Inquisition was a period when people asked searching questions of each other about Spanish culture, such as the distance to Madrid and the term attached to hats worn by matadors. For all his students know, the Enola Gay dropped a single microscopic atom on Hiroshima, and in the Boer War soldiers told each other digressive narratives intending to make the other side nod off. Though I desire to tell comforting tales to those learning Mormon history, I'll have to tell a postmodern story instead: the old modern ways of organizing history with the belief that the historian can narrate the past with objectivity, free of all bias and ideology, is equivalent to telling children that the "War of the Roses took place in a garden."

Bryan Appleyard laments that scientists take for granted a particular epistemology without even being aware that the epistemology filters evidence (dismissing contrary evidence) and favors particular ideologies. When they speak to each other, they can take for granted that the ideology and epistemology are widely shared by other scientists. When speaking to a broader public, "they tend to reveal a startling philosophical naïveté."[4] Historians, since the end of the nineteenth century, have attempted to model their discipline on the sciences; unfortunately, what they mimicked was this shortcoming in scientific work. That attempt to make history scientific has proven a failure, and in the last three decades

2. Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 82.

3. Billy Collins, "The History Teacher," in *Sailing Alone around the Room: New and Selected Poems* (New York: Random House, 2001), 38.

4. Bryan Appleyard, *Understanding the Present: Science and the Soul of Modern Man* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), xv.

historiography has instead emphasized that history is more like literature than science. The model of science favored by these scientistic historians (objective, value-free, free of all ideology and presuppositions) has largely fallen into disrepute even within the disciplines and philosophy of science. We should not be too surprised if historians lag behind these theoretical developments in science and sophisticated historiography; little more should we be surprised if amateur or self-appointed historians adopt the dominant-but-mistaken ethos of the discipline. We should not be surprised if professional and amateur historians also display a naïveté about textual analysis and understanding the past.

Dan Vogel and Brent Metcalfe have collected a group of essays about the Book of Mormon called *American Apocrypha: Essays on the Book of Mormon.* Published by Signature Books, this collection continues an ideological project from earlier books in Signature Book's Essays on Mormonism Series (see p. ii);[5] this project denies the essential historical claims of Latter-day Saint foundational events, mostly the historical nature of the Book of Mormon and first vision. While the editors of these volumes may believe the quaint notion that they have no ideology but are just doing impartial, unbiased, objective history, readers ought to realize that this is a myth.

Although the other essays in this volume deserve attention to both their weaknesses and strengths, I will narrow my focus to Edwin Firmage's "Historical Criticism and the Book of Mormon: A Personal Encounter" and Susan Staker's "Secret Things, Hidden Things: The Seer Story in the Imaginative Economy of Joseph Smith." These essays posit that when Joseph Smith dictated what they consider his novel or scripture, he encountered a crisis when Martin Harris lost the first 116 pages of the manuscript. When he resumed, Joseph Smith began not with those parts of the book placed first in the published volume and

5. The Essays on Mormonism Series includes Gary J. Bergera, ed., *Line upon Line: Essays on Mormon Doctrine* (1989); Dan Vogel, ed., *The Word of God: Essays on Mormon Scripture* (1990); D. Michael Quinn, ed., *The New Mormon History: Revisionist Essays on the Past* (1992); and Bryan Waterman, ed., *The Prophet Puzzle: Interpretive Essays on Joseph Smith* (1999). Another book in that series, George D. Smith, ed., *Faithful History: Essays on Writing Mormon History* (1992), collects essays from a couple of different ideological perspectives.

chronologically first in the narrative (1 and 2 Nephi), but with Mosiah through Moroni, composing the Nephi material last. Since this theory has elsewhere been defended by Brent Metcalfe, one of the editors of this volume, I will also address one of his essays in an earlier publication.[6]

I intend my approach to be contrapuntal; I will contrast the innocence of these writers about their own ideology with a recent book to underline how an adequate approach might develop, even among Book of Mormon critics who deny its historical claims. Huston Smith, in *Why Religion Matters,* decries the dominance of positivism (he usually uses the term *scientism*) in religious studies.[7]

Ideology and Worldview

We have made some progress over the past decade. Book of Mormon revisionists now rarely claim that they are merely doing objective historical research free of all bias, preconception, and ideology. These claims were common among Mormon revisionists just ten years ago. This positivism that claimed to free itself of all ideology became the dominant assumption of the modern university when it adopted the German disciplinary model. German universities "were positivistic to the core, and (because they have retained their place as the model for the American university) it is important to understand the militant secularism that is built into the word *positivism*."[8] Positivists deliberately set out to debunk religion, so with the collapse of the positivist project in the past forty years, some examination of the debunking itself needs to be undertaken. With religious studies and history still dominated by positivism at the level of the working historian, we should expect those who aspire to be called historians to also adopt the positivistic ethos.

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6. Brent Lee Metcalfe, "The Priority of Mosiah: A Prelude to Book of Mormon Exegesis," in *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon: Explorations in Critical Methodology,* ed. Brent Lee Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993), 395–444.

7. Huston Smith, *Why Religion Matters: The Fate of the Human Spirit in an Age of Disbelief* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001).

8. Ibid., 97.

Positivism commonly provides the worldview of those who deny the Book of Mormon historical status; this does not mean that all such historians fall under the category of revisionists, but this view is the dominant strain of history that emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, just when positivism was being challenged in philosophy, literary criticism, and historiography. But "worldviews tend to pass unnoticed,"[9] so before examining the textual claims of the Mosiah-first proponents, we must bring their worldview into focus. Positivism is just one version of modernity. Built into the modern worldview is what Huston Smith calls *scientism,* with two corollaries: (1) the scientific method is the only valid way to acquire knowledge, and (2) what science examines (material reality) is the fundamental reality. (These are parodies of science, so *scientism* as an ideology is not to be confused with *science.*) "These two corollaries are seldom voiced, for once they are brought to attention it is not difficult to see that they are arbitrary. Unsupported by facts, they are at best philosophical assumptions and at worst only opinions."[10] These assumptions are metaphysical presuppositions rather than being based on evidence (for they must be assumed before the researcher can define what counts as evidence). So consider the irony that the materialist claims only to deal with a material reality, precluding all supernaturalism, while making a metaphysical declaration. If we assume that material reality is the only reality, we have already excluded religious claims based on divine revelation. The result is that *positivists decide by fiat that any supernatural assertions are false.* This is the circumstance that Smith lays out as a condemnation of today's university—that its professors too often begin with the assumption that religion is false.

This habit of assuming that religion is untrue by subscribing to materialism is common in our universities, and we might also expect it of dilettantes who lack the credentials that academic degrees and teaching positions bestow:

9. Ibid., 48.
10. Ibid., 60.

> Such antireligion in American higher education was launched in full force in the late 19th and early 20th centuries by confident apostles of secularization who sought to popularize the doctrines of positivism, epistemological foundationalism, and scientific objectivity. Of course, each of these perspectives has been thoroughly dissected for decades now by all manner of philosophers, historians, theologians, and social theorists. The corpse of logical positivism is badly decomposed, but its ghost still haunts the halls and classrooms of the academy.[11]

Christian Smith explains this persistent antireligious attitude by referring to Pierre Bourdieu's notion of *habitus,* which "involves persistent and deeply internalized mental schemes that correspond to and reinforce particular social conditions, and that operate prereflectively through human actors."[12] So why are our universities so habitually and uncritically antireligious? Because so many of their citizens adhere to an unreflective positivism and materialism "that is no less a matter of faith than is theism."[13]

Although explicit assertions that the researcher can obtain objectivity are seldom made now by Mormon revisionists, you might expect that positivism's adherents might make other claims to being ideology-free. As a matter of deeply ingrained training, you might also expect this positivism to be coupled with an antireligious approach by those who claim the mantle of scholarship. So when the editors of *American Apocrypha* make a sharp distinction between what they do and what believers in the Book of Mormon do because the latter are "apologists" for an ideology but the former are not, they have made a positivist assertion; by asserting that only people who disagree with them are defenders of an ideology, the editors make the familiar positivist claims from the flip side of the coin. Vogel and Metcalfe refer six times in the introduction to those who disagree with them by variants

11. Christian Smith, "Force of Habit: Hostility and Condescension toward Religion in the University," *Books and Culture* 8/5 (2002): 20.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid., 21.

of the words *apologist* or *defender*. This vocabulary assumes that it is possible not to be an apologist for an ideology. This remnant of positivism still dominates the antireligious fervor in institutions of higher education. But, as Huston Smith has pointed out, worldviews tend to be taken for granted.[14] The kind of hermeneutical, philosophical, and methodological analysis required to go beyond the still-dominant cultural positivism is often too complex to be taught to undergraduates. Even graduate programs often do not train students in postpositivistic approaches. The instructors in hermeneutical and methodological courses tend to mirror now-outdated conceptual schemes. But some graduate students stand a chance of being awakened from their culturally induced positivist slumbers because they can detour around their positivistic professors by reading broadly. Those without graduate training in the philosophy of their disciplines stand little chance of moving beyond positivism.

Vogel and Metcalfe also assert that Book of Mormon "apologists" have advanced ad hoc arguments. They are referring specifically to discussions of Book of Mormon geography. "Rather than accept negative evidence," these critics claim, "apologists often invent *ad hoc* hypotheses to protect and maintain a crumbling central hypothesis. This tactic violates what is called the principle of parsimony, or Occam's Razor, which posits that the best hypothesis is the simplest or the one that makes the fewest assumptions" (p. ix; all internal references are to *American Apocrypha*). Vogel and Metcalfe are still caught in a positivistic historiographical theory, for they do not seem to understand the role of worldviews and how these generalizations authorize or invalidate evidence and theories. If I adhere to a worldview that permits supernatural intervention and you are an apologist for one that denies such actions, my arguments are always going to feel ad hoc to you. But then, your arguments are going to sound ad hoc to me also. Vogel and Metcalfe have not considered the possibility that what we have here is a clash of worldviews rather than a clash of evidence; the Mosiah-first theories seem ad hoc to me because they deal with the Book of Mormon

14. H. Smith, *Why Religion Matters,* 48.

without accepting its complexity. Only one Book of Mormon revisionist has even recognized that Book of Mormon complexity is a problem revisionists must engage.[15] His book is actually a rebuke to the writers of this volume, who lack the literary critical skills to analyze the Book of Mormon with the level of subtlety it deserves. The problem is that worldviews are metaphysical constructs that define what counts as valid support for a position.

Positivism is also manifest by one of the editors of *American Apocrypha* when he consistently refers to those "Mormon apologists" who disagree with his position[16] as if they are the only ones involved in the controversy who are apologists. One of Vogel's contributions in this book begins with the word *apologists*[17] and consistently accuses opponents of being defenders. It does not occur to Vogel that he is himself an apologist for an ideology that rests on positivism, that being an apologist for an ideology is an inescapable condition. A similar positivistic claim made by Vogel is that people who disagree with him use rhetoric, while he just presents the facts. For those who believe that there were gold plates, physical plates, for the Book of Mormon witnesses to see and touch, Vogel says "this argument is designed more to persuade than to enlighten."[18] But Vogel's argument seems designed the same way. He believes he can separate the persuasive part of an argument from its evidentiary value. Yet Vogel's assertion itself is rhetorical: in his own words, it is "designed more to persuade than to enlighten." Only a positivist could believe in the false binary opposition that separates rhetoric from logic in this way. "Whereas positivist forms of philosophy and science adhere to the 'objectivist' belief in pure knowledge untainted by

15. Mark Thomas, *Digging in Cumorah: Reclaiming Book of Mormon Narratives* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1999), admits that the Book of Mormon is sophisticated but makes only halting steps to examine that erudite and elusive quality.

16. Dan Vogel, "Echoes of Anti-Masonry: A Rejoinder to Critics of the Anti-Masonic Thesis," in *American Apocrypha: Essays on the Book of Mormon,* ed. Dan Vogel and Brent Lee Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 275–320; see especially his introduction and conclusion. All of Brent Metcalfe's writing uses the same terminology.

17. Dan Vogel, "The Validity of the Witnesses' Testimonies," in *American Apocrypha,* 79.

18. Ibid.

theoretical presuppositions or external motivations and interests, . . . the construction of knowledge is indissociable from various human interests that serve as motives for action."[19] Vogel seems unaware of his argument's rhetorical grounding, particularly of the rhetoric of positivism to which he appeals. "'Historical vacuums' are frequently used for sweeping condemnations of certain forms of inquiry; I have never seen any historians attacked for working in a 'rhetorical vacuum.'"[20] To be critical in historiography today, one must be aware of one's own ideological and rhetorical commitments. Jörn Rüsen notes in an interview that historians usually attempt to avoid any discussion of their own rhetoric because they adhere to a lingering positivism:

> When traditional historians hear the word "rhetoric" they become upset. Why? Because they think rhetoric is the contrary of academic rationality; accepting rhetoric means the contrary of being a good scholar. A good scholar means: to follow methodological rules of research, to go to the archives, and to make a good, empirically based interpretation of what happened in the past. Rhetoric is something different. It is against reason, it is against rationality; it is just playing around with words. This common opinion of professional historians is completely wrong.[21]

The literature on historiography now emphasizes that the ideology and rhetoric of the historian are probably the most important influences in historical interpretations, often being more influential than any archival or secondary source evidence. If this is true, then those who publish with a press such as Signature Books must recognize that they have an ideology, that their ideology is a dominant influence in their writing, and that they select through their ideology which evidence they will see as important or unimportant.

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19. Best, *Politics of Historical Vision,* 153.

20. Hans Kellner, *Historical Language and Historical Representation: Getting the Story Crooked* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 122.

21. Ewa Domańska, *Encounters: Philosophy of History after Postmodernism* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998), 151.

Vogel's goal in his essay about Book of Mormon witnesses is to deny any material or naturalistic witness of plates or angels. Following positivists who believe an event is valid only if it can be demonstrated empirically, he argues:

> Despite the use of naturalistic language in the Testimony of Three Witnesses—particularly the emphasis on seeing the plates with their "eyes" as well as the failure to mention the angel's glory—subsequent statements by Harris and Whitmer point to the visionary aspects of their experience. In other words, the event was internal and subjective and in the fullest sense a vision.[22]

While in the very act of accusing Joseph Smith of charlatanry, Vogel conflates visions with hallucinations to make the straightforward assertion that visionary experiences do not amount to historical evidence: "The real question is not the trustworthiness of the witnesses but whether testimony resulting from visions or hallucinations is reliable."[23] Vogel begins by implying that rhetoric designed to persuade does not have the same force of knowledge as his more valid logic. He ends his essay by asserting that only naturalistic, materialistic experience makes for valid historical evidence. He uses what Best calls a "positivistic rhetoric,"[24] while claiming that only his opponents engage in rhetoric. "Good historiography requires hermeneutical sensitivity, empathetic and imaginative reconstruction, and reflexive methodological sophistication,"[25] none of which this collection of essays demonstrates.

I have elsewhere pointed out the positivistic assumptions in Brent Metcalfe's work.[26] Vogel, similar to Metcalfe, is not self-critical and consequently ends up an uncritical apologist for positivism. Again,

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22. Vogel, "Validity of the Witnesses' Testimonies," 86. See page 97 for a similar statement regarding the Testimony of Eight Witnesses.

23. Ibid., 108.

24. Best, *Politics of Historical Vision,* 237.

25. Ibid.

26. See Alan Goff, "Historical Narrative, Literary Narrative," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 5/1 (1996): 50–102; and Alan Goff, "Uncritical Theory and Thin Description: The Resistance to History," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 7/1 (1995): 170–207.

positivism is that worldview that claims it has no worldview, that adheres to a naïve realism which assumes that it reveals the world exactly as it is, free of ideology and rhetoric.

> The deeper fact, however, is that to have or not have a worldview is not an option, for peripheral vision always conditions what we are attending to focally, and in conceptual "seeing" the periphery has no cutoff. The only choice we have is to be consciously aware of our worldviews and criticize them where they need criticizing, or let them work on us unnoticed and acquiesce to living unexamined lives.[27]

Because positivism is that ideology prohibiting self-criticism, Vogel and Metcalfe are not aware that they constitute the evidence from within a positivistic worldview while denying the validity of competing worldviews.

The positivist worldview denies the supernatural. That denial is not based on evidence but on presuppositions. Modernity presupposes that material reality is all there is. Religious belief requires that reality not be exhausted by a naïve materialism. But to claim that materialism is adequate to explain all of reality is to invoke a metaphysics.[28] We must recognize that modernity is being contradictory here, for to claim that materialism is all there is goes beyond material claims; it is not itself empirically verifiable.

> What is and is not seen to be scientism is itself metaphysically controlled, for if one believes that the scientific worldview is true, the two appendages to it that turn it into scientism are not seen to be opinions. (I remind the reader that the appendages are, first, that science is our best window onto the world and, second, that matter is the foundation of everything that exists.) They present themselves as facts. That they are not provable does not count against them, because they are taken to be self-evident—as plainly so as the proverbial hand before one's face.[29]

27. H. Smith, *Why Religion Matters,* 21.
28. Ibid., 42.
29. Ibid., 64.

Because worldviews are large-scale conceptual structures that shape and misshape what we permit as evidence for particular theories, "what is taken to be self-evident depends on one's worldview, and disputes among worldviews are . . . unresolvable."[30]

This modern worldview, of which positivism is just one subset, is imperialistic; it insists it is the only valid approach to truth.[31] Science, social science, religious studies, biblical criticism, history—all disciplines have accepted the modern assertion that religious claims are only metaphorical, out of the realm of true knowledge which they themselves deliver. In other words, "the modern university is not agnostic toward religion; it is actively hostile to it."[32] Since the contributors to *American Apocrypha* are uncritical apologists for that version of modernity called positivism, its readers must be aware of that larger historical background even if its editors are not.

Mosiah-First Theories

When I first read Brent Metcalfe's essay positing the Mosiah-first theory, I was a bit puzzled by its lack of focus. I did not recognize its ideological implication. Several textual relationships are relevant in the Book of Mormon; I have elsewhere argued that allusions from the Book of Mormon to the Pentateuch and the work of the Deuteronomist (Joshua through 2 Kings) are particularly important.[33] Other allusions from one or another Book of Mormon passage to earlier passages deserve careful attention. These three attempts to support a Mosiah-first theory bring ideological presuppositions. Firmage notes that "questions about the Book of Mormon's origins" cannot yet be answered, but the uncertainty does not "diminish the certainty of [the] conclusion that the Book of Mormon is a modern text" (p. 15). If you sneak in a hidden ideological assumption that Joseph Smith

30. Ibid.
31. Ibid., 69.
32. Ibid., 96.
33. Alan Goff, "Scratching the Surface of Book of Mormon Narrative," *FARMS Review of Books* 12/2 (2000): 51–82.

authored a thinly veiled autobiographical novel, it is hardly surprising that your conclusion will be that the scripture is a modern novel. Literary critics have long used tools of textual analysis such as allusion, transumption, intertextuality, and the like to analyze textual relationships. Rather than employ any of these sophisticated tools, Metcalfe, Firmage, and Staker use an ad hoc Mosiah-first theory as a shortcut to avoid the complex textual analysis the text requires.

But, as Metcalfe notes, belief in the Book of Mormon as an ancient text can survive the Mosiah-first hypothesis. Some believers who have considered the question of translation sequence *do* believe in Mosiah-first (John Welch, Royal Skousen, and Dan Peterson included, according to Metcalfe).[34] If you believe in the Book of Mormon, then you believe there were plates from which Joseph Smith translated. Therefore, it does not matter if the dictation started from Mosiah or Nephi, because the book is grounded in those physical records. But Metcalfe assumes that "intrinsically woven into the Book of Mormon's fabric are not only remnants of the peculiar dictation sequence but threads of authorship. The composite of those elements explored in this essay point to Smith as the narrative's chief designer."[35] If you take for granted that the plates did not exist but that Joseph Smith fabricated a novel out of his own mind and experiences, then the Mosiah-first theory means that you can no longer believe in the book as an authentic ancient record. The Mosiah-first presupposition is not, in itself, doing the ideological work for these three writers; it is the assumption that Joseph Smith is the work's novelist. This argument is obviously circular. Does this fact undercut it? Metcalfe, Firmage, and Staker never confess that they have not argued for their most crucial assumption: there were no gold plates. Perhaps, like Sterling McMurrin, these writers would best state more explicitly their ideological assumption that angels do not deliver books to boys.[36]

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34. Metcalfe, "Priority of Mosiah," 396–99. John Welch and Tim Rathbone endorse the Mosiah-first theory in the FARMS Update collected in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon: A Decade of New Research,* ed. John W. Welch (Provo, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992), 3.

35. Metcalfe, "Priority of Mosiah," 433.

36. Blake Ostler, "An Interview with Sterling M. McMurrin," *Dialogue* 17/1 (1984): 25.

Metcalfe, Firmage, and Staker have different emphases, but they share a common ideological framework. Metcalfe, taking for granted an unargued evolutionary assumption that more complex forms must be chronologically later than what he considers "primitive" forms, grants the following:

> Occasionally the middle section of the book (Mosiah and Alma) displays concepts which are less well developed than in the initial section (1 Nephi–Omni). These earlier portions are more congruent with later sections. It is difficult to explain the more primitive elements in Mosiah and Alma unless one assumes that Mosiah was the first installment in the Book of Mormon narrative.[37]

This chronology is crucial for all three of these writers. They use versions of this theory to establish parallel chronologies between Book of Mormon events and episodes in Joseph Smith's life. Besides making assumptions about textual relationships, these authors assume primitive ideas about the relationship between literature and reality. These same assumptions appear when journalists interview novelists and persistently ask how much of the narrative is autobiographical. If Smith wrote the Book of Mormon as a novel, they cannot conceive of the possibility that he just made the material up using his own imagination. They fall into what Mark Thomas sees as a trap: "almost all serious Mormon scholarship on the book attempts to reconstruct its historical origins, making little or no effort at interpretation."[38] While Thomas agrees with these revisionists that the scripture is a modern work of fiction, he still condemns this fixation on proving origins as hindering a sophisticated literary understanding of the text. The ideological assumption that Joseph Smith wrote the book as a novel is almost always coupled with superficial textual analysis. Such an assumption depends on a dubious theory of fiction while at the same time insisting on the fictional status of the book: Joseph Smith made

37. Metcalfe, "Priority of Mosiah," 415–16.
38. Thomas, *Digging in Cumorah,* viii.

the narrative up but couldn't actually do so except as he expressed and transformed his own autobiography.

Because Susan Staker articulates more specifically than the other two writers the parallels between Book of Mormon narrative and Joseph Smith's life, her essay most precisely lays out the ideological assumption built into this project. "Thus the threshold story of Mormonism, the entrance to surviving portions of the Book of Mormon, is about a man whose plot line mirrors in crucial ways that of the nineteenth-century man with the seer stone who dictated the story" (pp. 235–36).

The Mosiah-first theory in the hands of these revisionists depends on a particular historical development of the Book of Mormon text. After the loss of the 116 pages, Joseph Smith started over at Mosiah. Mosiah, then, has the most primitive and least developed ideas and knowledge about Christ's mission and about doctrine. First and 2 Nephi, being last, are the most complex and developed. This theory also requires that Joseph Smith not know how the end of the story (1 and 2 Nephi) is going to develop when he dictated Mosiah, Alma, Mormon, and similar material:

> It is not difficult to explain why prophecies of Jesus in Mosiah and Alma 1–16 evidence no awareness of Nephi's prophecies of Jesus' American ministry. The explanation is simply that during the initial stages of the new 1829 translation (Mosiah to Alma 16), Joseph Smith himself had not yet conceived the notion of Christ's visit to America. The ignorance of Nephi's prophecies manifested by the characters in Mosiah and Alma 1–16 reflects the fact that Smith, the creator-translator, did not yet himself know the turn his narrative was to take. Nephi's unambiguous prophecies reflect the fact that they were translated, or as I would now prefer to say, composed, after the events they claimed to foretell. (Firmage, pp. 6–7)

I will examine the question of whether the individuals in Alma, Mosiah, Helaman, and 3 Nephi are not familiar with the material in 1 and 2 Nephi because "1 Nephi–Words of Mormon proves to be an epilogue

to the Book of Mormon proper not only in terms of order of composition but also in terms of subject matter" (p. 9).

Staker's commitment to this theory depends a good deal on the work of Firmage and Metcalfe. Her essay contains comments on typology or type-scenes and also some discussion of narrative voice. Her treatment would benefit from a reading in narrative and literary theory of what critics call focalization. Staker shows no awareness of the literary tools and concepts that could deepen her reading of the text. Nor does she show awareness that quite a few readers have discussed such notions as exodus and Moses typology in the Book of Mormon and its similarity to biblical typology.

Staker's position, like that of Firmage and Metcalfe, depends more on the presupposition that Joseph Smith was the author of a work of autobiographical fiction than it does on the Mosiah-first thesis. Having smuggled in that assumption, Staker constructs timelines for both Book of Mormon development and Joseph Smith's biography that are mutually dependent. Her chronology is based more on ideology than on anything else.

> Already, the March and April revelations demonstrate the complicated ways the Book of Mormon narrative and Smith's own world would mirror and interact over the course of the spring and summer. Ultimately, the complicated logic of the seer stories can be traced only when the dictation plot for the spring and summer of 1829 is expanded to include the chronology of Smith's work on both the Book of Mormon and its environing revelations. Indeed, the energy that drives and structures the complex seer narratives in both the ancient and modern texts seems derived as much from the problems facing Smith in 1829 as by problems within the Book of Mormon world. (p. 248)

These are grand claims. She stakes everything on a chronology that places Book of Mormon events alongside events in upstate New York and Harmony, Pennsylvania. For example, in April 1829 Staker claims that a revelation about Oliver Cowdery's possible translation

of records included remarks about "other hidden records awaiting translation. Arguably, this glimpse into Smith's future mimes Mosiah's story, which includes the discovery of several new records. . . . Strikingly, Smith enacts this same sub-plot within the frame of his own story during the time he is dictating Mosiah" (p. 250). Mosiah's recovery of actual records is not placed next to Joseph Smith's recovery of actual records, for Joseph Smith had possessed the gold plates for many months before this episode. The parallel does not seem striking to me. (Staker often refers to her parallels as "striking.") Any deviation in the Mosiah-first theory of composition or in the Joseph Smith chronology is going to spell trouble, for it will throw off her temporal parallels.

If readers were to ask these critics to make their ideological presuppositions explicit, they would find not only the positivistic and similar modern assumptions (such as unstated evolutionary models) at work but also the idea that Joseph Smith had no knowledge of the material later to emerge in 1 and 2 Nephi when he invented Mosiah–Moroni. At least some novelists must have the ending in mind from the very start of the writing process, but these three writers posit the other type of novelist, the kind who goes wherever the narrative leads with no master plan. I think we can examine this thesis, crucial to all three writers, to see if applies to the Mosiah-first theory of writing the Book of Mormon.

Allusion and Quotation Referring to 1 and 2 Nephi

Is it plausible to believe that 1 and 2 Nephi were composed last and not believe in those plates? Looking at passages that refer back to those first two books might illuminate this question.

The Promise of Prosperity in the Land

A promise first turns up in the Book of Mormon in 1 Nephi 2:20–21: "Inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments, ye shall prosper and shall be led to a land of promise. . . . And inasmuch as thy brethren shall rebel against thee, they shall be cut off from the presence of

the Lord." This promise was, apparently, also recorded in the earlier record of Lehi, for the patriarch notes that he obtained the promise for his descendents (2 Nephi 1:9; in Alma 9:13–14, Alma also refers to the promise as originating with Lehi). This promise is alluded to or quoted more than forty times in the Book of Mormon. In a Mosiah-first Book of Mormon, it would first make its appearance in Mosiah 1:7, 17. Here Benjamin repeats the covenant by specifically telling his sons that they are "promises which the Lord made to our fathers" (Mosiah 1:7). The Mosiah-first revisionist might speculate that these promises really point back to the lost book of Lehi rather than to 1 and 2 Nephi. But this entire chapter shows fairly detailed knowledge of the initial rift between the Nephites and the Lamanites (a separation, by the way, that opened *after* Lehi's death and presumably after Lehi's record ended), the records and other symbols acquired from Laban, and the Liahona. If Joseph Smith is just winging it when he later composes the Nephi books, he will have to incorporate a lot of specific references. The real violence this theory does to the text is that it requires Smith to remember hundreds of prior compositions to "allude" back to a story that has not yet been written. If there really had been gold plates, this Mosiah-first theory would pose no difficulty, because those plates provide a way to overcome this problem. But since Staker, Metcalfe, and Firmage presume a priori that the plates did not exist, they must have some unnecessarily complicated theory to account for such "allusions" and "quotations." I would call that an ad hoc theory.

This covenant promise is alluded to or cited ten times in the book of Mosiah. It comes up prominently again when Alma advises his son Helaman in Alma 36–38. Two of these citations in chapter 36 envelop a reference to the Lehite exodus from 1 Nephi. Eleven citations of this promise appear in the book of Alma and four in Helaman. One would expect this promise to be more primitive in the earlier parts of the Mosiah-first Book of Mormon. Eleven passages with the promise are in 1 and 2 Nephi, though I do not find more complex development in those passages. The bridge books (Jacob–Words of Mormon) contain the promise twice (Jarom 1:9 and Omni 1:6). The more intuitive, simpler solution to textual relationships among these citations would cite

a promise first made in the text to Lehi or Nephi. To have the promise come first to Mosiah requires some additional explanation.

The Language of the Fathers

When King Benjamin is ready to pass his kingship and records to the next generation, he calls his sons together. He says of the plates of brass, "Were it not possible that our father, Lehi, could have remembered all these things, to have taught them to his children, except it were for the help of these plates . . ." (Mosiah 1:4), yet this is precisely what these Mosiah-first revisionists insist Joseph Smith did. He must remember all these hundreds (or perhaps even thousands) of allusions and then finally include them in 1 and 2 Nephi; the notion of intertextuality challenges the older notion of allusion in that it does not care about lines of filiation, that is, which passage came first. These revisionists are postmodern without knowing it, for they turn the notion of allusion on its head, having allusions come chronologically before the original passage, the antitype before the prototype, the reference before the initial iteration.

In this passage from the Book of Mormon, Benjamin specifically names the source—Lehi: "for he having been taught in the language of the Egyptians therefore he could read these engravings" (Mosiah 1:4). This takes us back to Mosiah 1:2, for Benjamin had taught his sons "in all the language of his fathers, that thereby they might become men of understanding; and that they might know concerning the prophecies which had been spoken by the mouths of their fathers." It is true that these revisionists might say that these passages allude back not to a nonexistent 1 Nephi, but to the recently lost book of Lehi. Nevertheless, Joseph Smith would have to refer back to a text he does not have and would still have to be relying for these manifold allusions on his own memory; having a set of plates alleviates this problem because it would then not place the burden of allusive memory on Joseph Smith but on Mormon or some other writer/editor. Some adequate explanation will have to be proffered about how Smith was able to keep all these allusions straight when it came to composing the Nephi books.

Benjamin is here alluding to 1 Nephi 1:2. Mormon is going to allude to this passage when his turn comes: "we have written this record according to our knowledge, in the characters which are called among us the reformed Egyptian" (Mormon 9:32). This is not Mormon's only allusion to this passage from Nephi. "I began," he also claims, "to be learned somewhat after the manner of the learning of my people" (Mormon 1:2). And Mormon is not the only author to allude to this passage from Nephi. Enos states that he also was taught by his father, "knowing my father that he was a just man—for he taught me in his language, and also in the nurture and admonition of the Lord" (Enos 1:1). There from the very end of the Mosiah-first Book of Mormon, we go to the first of the same volume. Zeniff alludes to the same passage when he says, "I, Zeniff, having been taught in all the language of the Nephites" (Mosiah 9:1).

The revisionist could claim that these passages do not really allude to 1 Nephi 1 but to Mosiah 1. But in Mosiah 1 the text already refers back to "the prophecies which had been spoken by the mouths of their fathers" (Mosiah 1:2); the very first two verses in the Mosiah-first Book of Mormon (dictated, according to this theory, on 7 April 1829) already refer to the passage from 1 Nephi (dictated about June 1829). These allusions become a difficult problem if you assume there were no plates to translate from.

Tree of Life Allusions

The earlier writers in the Mosiah-first Book of Mormon seem to know quite a bit about the two visions of the tree of life from 1 Nephi. There are many allusions to the tree of life material later in the scripture. For example, Alma's extended metaphor of planting the seed of faith ends by comparing the fully grown seed to the tree of life (Alma 32:40; see also 32:41 and 33:23). Alma refers to the fruit as "most precious, which is sweet above all that is sweet, and which is white above all that is white, yea, and pure above all that is pure" (Alma 32:42). This alludes to either Lehi's description of the fruit (1 Nephi 8:11) or Nephi's (1 Nephi 11:8). For these tree of life allusions, no comparable passage

exists in the early part of the Mosiah-first text to be the original. The only original text must be from 1 Nephi (or the lost book of Lehi).

Lamoni's conversion under Ammon's guidance is framed with vocabulary from the tree of life visions (Alma 19:6). Similarly, the book of Helaman refers to "laying hold upon the word of God" (Helaman 3:29), which is wording from 1 Nephi 8:24 or 1 Nephi 15:24. Such specific knowledge of passages not yet written poses a problem for the idea that Joseph Smith composed the Book of Mormon as Firmage, Staker, and Metcalfe want us to believe.

Tree of life allusions are so common throughout the Book of Mormon that to posit an extensive array of allusions written before the allegory itself complicates this theory beyond what its ideological foundation will bear. Let me provide just one more example. When Alma the Younger preaches to the Nephites, he calls them to repentance by asking a whole series of questions about their spiritual state. He then frames their return to God in a trope from Nephi and Lehi's records: "Yea, he saith: Come unto me and ye shall partake of the fruit of the tree of life; yea, ye shall eat and drink of the bread and the waters of life freely" (Alma 5:34). He closes his speech to the people at Zarahemla with a similar figure of speech: "Come and be baptized unto repentance, that ye also may be partakers of the fruit of the tree of life" (Alma 5:62). It seems overly complicated to posit that a whole web of allusions to these tree of life images is created first and then later the coherent story that ties them all together (the word of God is a double-edged blade as it cuts both ways).

Miscellaneous Allusions to 1 and 2 Nephi

After breaking with his brothers, Nephi organizes his people and achieves a level of righteousness they were not able to attain before there were Lamanites and Nephites. He states that "it came to pass that we lived after the manner of happiness" (2 Nephi 5:27). This passage is alluded to at least three times. A later prophet named Nephi engages in nostalgia for that earlier time: "Oh, that I could have had my days in the days when my father first came out of the land of Jerusalem, that I could have joyed with him in the promised land; then were his

people easy to be entreated, firm to keep the commandments of God, and slow to be led to iniquity" (Helaman 7:7). That level is surpassed later in the Book of Mormon during a time when there was no contention, lying, murder, adultery, nor revisionists: "and surely there could not be a happier people among all the people who had been created by the hand of God. There were no robbers, nor murderers, neither were there Lamanites, nor any manner of -ites" (4 Nephi 1:16–17). Similarly, during Moroni's day, the passage explicitly quotes the promises made to the fathers: "they shall be blessed, inasmuch as they shall keep my commandments they shall prosper in the land. But remember, inasmuch as they will not keep my commandments they shall be cut off from the presence of the Lord" (Alma 50:20). Intervening verses note that the promise has been verified. Then the narrator notes, "behold there never was a happier time among the people of Nephi, since the days of Nephi, than in the days of Moroni" (Alma 50:23).

Similarly, when a group of Nephites severs their connection to the Nephite tradition by marking their foreheads (Alma 3:4), this reminds the narrator (Mormon) of how the Lamanites were first marked off from the Nephites (Alma 3:6-9). For Mormon, this marking is not a matter of race or descent but of adherence to different traditions (Alma 3:11). Mormon then explicitly refers to 2 Nephi 5:

> Thus the word of God is fulfilled, for these are the words which he said to Nephi: Behold, the Lamanites have I cursed, and I will set a mark on them that they and their seed may be separated from thee and thy seed, from this time henceforth and forever, except they repent of their wickedness and turn to me that I may have mercy upon them. And again: I will set a mark upon him that mingleth his seed with thy brethren, that they may be cursed also. And again: I will set a mark upon him that fighteth against thee and thy seed. And again, I say he that departeth from thee shall no more be called thy seed; and I will bless thee, and whomsoever shall be called thy seed, henceforth and forever; and these were the promises of the Lord unto Nephi and to his seed. (Alma 3:14-17)

The passage Mormon cites is 2 Nephi 5:21-24, but notice that the wording in that passage differs considerably from Mormon's though the source text is apparent:

> And he had caused the cursing to come upon them, yea, even a sore cursing, because of their iniquity. For behold, they had hardened their hearts against him, that they had become like unto a flint; wherefore, as they were white, and exceedingly fair and delightsome, that they might not be enticing unto my people the Lord did cause a skin of blackness to come upon them. And thus saith the Lord God: I will cause that they shall be loathsome unto thy people, save they shall repent of their iniquities. And cursed shall be the seed of him that mixeth with their seed; for they shall be cursed even with the same cursing. And the Lord spake it, and it was done. (2 Nephi 5:21-23)

This is very specific information that Mormon knows about Nephi's narrative and writings. If the Alma passage were written prior to the 2 Nephi passage, then Joseph Smith not only would have had to remember to pen the Nephi text without being able to refer back to the other passage but would also have had to build the specific reference to Nephi as the original source long before Nephi became the original source. All of this Joseph Smith would have to do without being able to refer to notes[39] while composing at a rate of thirty-five hundred words a day.[40]

Richard Rust has pointed out that we have yet much work ahead of us before we begin to appreciate how often the Book of Mormon alludes to itself. None of this work has been done by revisionists because they have no ideological interest in doing so; they, in fact, have an ideological interest in making the textual elements in the scripture as simple as their own reading of it. Rust points to one passage from 3 Nephi that refers to one of the first chapters in the Book of Mormon:

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39. Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 32.

40. Ibid., 37.

the church was eclipsed by the wickedness of the people "in all the land save it were among a few of the Lamanites who were converted unto the true faith; and they would not depart from it, for they were firm, and steadfast, and immovable, willing with all diligence to keep the commandments of the Lord" (3 Nephi 6:14). This passage fulfills Lehi's oldest yearning for his son Lemuel, who is promised in the valley named after him that if he would be "like unto this valley, firm and steadfast, and immovable in keeping the commandments of the Lord," he would be blessed (1 Nephi 2:10).[41] Rust doesn't note another passage that alludes to this same material. Like the passage from 3 Nephi, Helaman 15 comments on the Lamanites who were more righteous than their contemporary Nephite brethren (it is, after all, Samuel the Lamanite speaking). The prophet then cites the Lamanites as an example to the Nephites for "as many as have come to this, ye know of yourselves are firm and steadfast in the faith, and the thing wherewith they have been made free" (Helaman 15:8). The textual elements that include allusion are too complex for revisionist readers to even mention or notice. The possibility of complex intertextual relationships is opened up (made possible) by the believer's ideological commitment to finding a rich and rewarding text; the same possibility is foreclosed by the revisionist's commitment to any old ad hoc explanation that will do the ideological work of dismissing the Book of Mormon as an ancient text.

I have mentioned only a few allusions to show the difficulties faced by Mosiah-first revisionists. The examples given are sufficient to raise an issue: if you propose a theory of textual development that has such counterintuitive results as to require a writer to allude to a passage before he has even composed that passage, more convincing evidence is called for than has been produced so far. The evidence ought to rely less on the ideological assumptions that there were no gold plates and that Joseph Smith composed a modern novel.

41. Richard Dilworth Rust, "Ancient Literary Forms in the Book of Mormon," *FARMS Review of Books* 14/1–2 (2002): 89.

Concluding Unscientific Postscript

Firmage notes in a brief autobiographical section of his essay how he came to believe no longer in the Book of Mormon and the church (see p. 13). This narrative form is common enough among Mormon intellectuals who have left orthodox belief that we ought to call it the conversion-to-modernity type-scene. "I have often thought that what happened to me in Berkeley was fundamentally a conversion or, if you like, an anti-conversion" (p. 2). *Conversion* is the right word, for not only did Firmage shift from believing the restored gospel, he adopted another form of religious belief—in modernity. For the sake of convenience, I call this religion the Church of Humanity, named after the positivistic church founded by Auguste Comte as a substitute for Christianity. Modernity is like a religion; it is an encompassing worldview that restructures the believer's frame of reference; it has its own ordinances and community (symposia instead of church attendance, sacramental publications rather than bread and water, testimonial panels at MHA meetings instead of church meetings, doctrines such as materialism rather than the atonement, and heretics who are college-educated yet still believers in Mormon claims). It also has a built-in logic of exclusion that from the outset declares competing faiths deficient; it claims to be the one-and-only true way to truth. Most importantly, it also requires a leap of faith, too often a leap that its adherents take uncritically. The version of modernity that has dominated intellectual culture over the past century is positivism. Positivism by its very definition denies validity to religious belief, restricting religion to the infancy of human development. Positivism privileges its positions over religion in ways that we now recognize as illegitimate. Positivism is not what it claims for itself, though its acolytes do not consider the possibility that postmodern thought has undermined its central claims.

So while the editors of *American Apocrypha,* most of its contributors, and the editorial leadership at Signature Books are positivists who misunderstand the nature of historical writing, it does little good for people like me to sit at the last-stop gas station as the Signature

stable of writers drive on up the road. I have been saying for more than a decade as they fuel up, "You know, that road you are on is a dead end that leads directly into the base of a cliff in a blind canyon; if you won't try another road, at least buckle up and drive slowly around that last bend." They then gun their engines and peel out of the gas station. Positivist historiography has exhausted itself and the New Mormon History will have to be reconfigured without positivism as its foundation. The shift will bring with it wrenching adjustments, but it cannot be avoided for the difficulty it requires.

The movie *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* is set in medieval England, AD 932. Part of the humor is supplied by the bevy of anachronisms. One of my favorites occurs at the beginning of the film when King Arthur rides up to a castle and asks two peasants to whom the castle belongs. The peasants take umbrage at the claim that he is their king or that they must have a lord, for they assert they live in a state of anarchy with a rotating executive selected weekly. The exchange rings with abundant Marxist language of domination, oppression, and a "self-perpetuating aristocracy" that takes advantage of the working class. Asked for the source of his own claim to be king, Arthur tells the tale of the Lady of the Lake and Excalibur. One peasant responds to this narrative with derision because for him "supreme executive power derives from a mandate from the masses, not from some farcical aquatic ceremony." To hear the peasant asserting these ideas that weren't minted until the modern period is to see the timeframe get jumbled. Brent Metcalfe, Susan Staker, and Edwin Firmage have a similar problem to overcome in their assertion that Joseph Smith wrote a novel that started with King Benjamin's speech; just as the peasant cites Marxists long before there were any, these revisionists have the Book of Mormon presenting complex and multiple passages long before they were written. If only their ideologically inspired narrative were as humorous, the new crop of Mormon film directors would soon be taking a movie into production about the pursuit of the positivist grail.