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Abstract Introduction to the current issue, including editor's picks. Peterson argues that just as there is not sufficient evidence to prove the authenticity of the Book of Mormon, neither is there sufficient evidence to prove the falsity of it. He discusses common theories explaining Joseph Smith's fraud and then explains the invalidity of such theories.

Editor's Introduction

"In the Hope That Something Will Stick": Changing Explanations for the Book of Mormon

Daniel C. Peterson

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In the "Editors' Introduction" to their 2002 anthology *American Apocrypha,* Dan Vogel and Brent Metcalfe declare, "Had the Book of Mormon been what Joseph Smith said—not an allegory with spiritual import but a literal history of Hebrew immigrants to America—this should have been verified by now."[1]

It is a strange statement. For example, one wonders when, exactly, the deadline for verification passed. Was it in 2000? 1990? 1950? 1880? How was the date chosen? Who set it? In what would "verification" consist? Would such verification still allow for the exercise of religious faith?

Perhaps more significantly, though, one wonders why the statement could not just as easily be turned on its head: "Were the Book of Mormon false, this should have been verified by now." One could, with at least equal justification, announce that "Had the Book of Mormon been a fraud, its critics should by now have been able to agree on an explanation as to how, why, and by whom it was created." That

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A slightly different version of this essay was first presented at the 2002 conference of the Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research (FAIR; see www.fair-lds.org), in Provo, Utah. It represents a sketch for what I hope will eventually become a more detailed study of the varying counterexplanations that have been offered for the Book of Mormon.

1. "Editors' Introduction," in *American Apocrypha: Essays on the Book of Mormon*, ed. Dan Vogel and Brent Lee Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), vii.

they have not done so seems to me powerful evidence that it is not, in fact, fraudulent, and that its dedicated enemies, who have devoted immense quantities of energy to their enterprise for the better part of two centuries now, have signally failed.

The fact is, the falsehood of the Book of Mormon has no more been demonstrated to the satisfaction of all serious observers than has its truth. But what is even more striking is that critics of the Book of Mormon have not yet been able even to formulate a coherent counter-explanation, a unified global theory, with which to challenge the traditional story of the book's origins. As John A. Widtsoe remarked in his 1951 preface to the second volume of Francis Kirkham's *New Witness for Christ in America,* "Unbelievers in Joseph Smith's story have not been able to agree on any one explanation. It has even been [regarded as] necessary by some writers to change the explanation they first proposed. This unsuccessful, changing search is of itself an evidence of the truth of the Prophet's own story."[2]

The First Theory

At first, Joseph Smith was regarded as wholly responsible for the production of the Book of Mormon. This was the explanation that completely dominated skeptical discourse until roughly four years after the publication of the book. But it arose before the book even appeared. Since Joseph was a superstitious and ignorant peasant, the Book of Mormon would naturally be beneath serious notice. He was "an ignoramus," said the *Gem* of Rochester for 15 May 1830.[3] "That *spindle shanked* ignoramus Jo Smith," echoed the *Palmyra Reflector* for 30 June 1830.[4] An "*ignoramus*" who "can neither read nor write," said Obediah Dogberry in the same newspaper, on 7 July 1830.[5] As the

2. John A. Widtsoe, preface to *A New Witness for Christ in America: The Book of Mormon,* by Francis W. Kirkham (Independence, MO: Zion's, 1951), 2:vii–viii (pagination varies). Because of the relatively easy accessibility of Kirkham's book, references to his republication of many sources will be given.

3. "Imposition and Blasphemy!!—Money Diggers, &c.," *Rochester Gem,* 15 May 1830, 15 (Kirkham, *New Witness,* 2:46).

4. *Palmyra Reflector,* 30 June 1830, 53 (Kirkham, *New Witness,* 2:56).

5. *Palmyra Reflector,* 7 July 1830, 60 (Kirkham, *New Witness,* 2:53, 54).

Palmyra Freeman noted in 1829, "The subject was almost invariably treated as it should have been—with *contempt*."[6] "This most clumsy of all impositions," Dogberry characterized the Book of Mormon in January 1831.[7]

In February of that same year, Dogberry offered a more extended estimation of Joseph Smith and his family. The Prophet had "but little expression of countenance, other than that of dullness; his mental powers appear to be extremely limited, and from the small opportunity he had had at school, he made little or no proficiency. . . . We have never been able to learn that any of the family were ever noted for much else than ignorance and stupidity."[8]

The Reverend Thomas Campbell, in a February 1831 letter to his former colleague Sidney Rigdon, dismissed the Book of Mormon as "a production beneath contempt, and utterly unworthy the reception of a schoolboy."[9] During the same month, Thomas Campbell's illustrious preacher-son Alexander told the readers of his famous jeremiad against the Book of Mormon, entitled "Delusions," that Joseph Smith was "as ignorant and as impudent a knave as ever wrote a book," an "ignorant and impudent liar."[10]

> The book professes to be written at intervals and by different persons during the long period of 1020 years. And yet for uniformity of style, there never was a book more evidently written by one set of fingers, nor more certainly conceived in one cranium since the first book appeared in human language, than this same book. If I could swear to any man's voice, face, or person, assuming different names, I could swear that this book was written by one man. And as Joseph Smith is a very

6. *Rochester Daily Advertiser and Telegraph,* 31 August 1829, quoting the *Palmyra Freeman* (Kirkham, *New Witness,* 2:31).

7. *Palmyra Reflector,* 6 January 1831 (Kirkham, *New Witness,* 2:64).

8. *Palmyra Reflector,* 1 February 1831 (Kirkham, *New Witness,* 2:68).

9. Thomas Campbell, *Painesville Telegraph,* 15 February 1831 (Kirkham, *New Witness,* 2:94).

10. Alexander Campbell, "Delusions," *Millennial Harbinger,* 7 February 1831, 91, 92 (Kirkham, *New Witness,* 2:105).

> *ignorant* man and is called *the author* on the title page, I cannot doubt for a single moment but that he is the sole author and proprietor of it.[11]

The Book of Mormon, Campbell said, "is, without exaggeration, the meanest book in the English language."[12] "As ignorant as too many of the people are," said a March 1831 letter written in Palmyra and published in the *Painesville Telegraph,* "it is hardly possible that so clumsy an imposition can spread to any considerable extent."[13] Also in March 1831, David I. Burnett, editor of the *Evangelical Inquirer* in Dayton, Ohio, described Joseph Smith as "a perfect ignoramus," though Burnett was unable to be more precise about the length of the Book of Mormon than to say that it was "from 500 to 1000 pages," since, he confessed, "when I saw it I did not notice the number."[14] The 9 April 1840 issue of the Baptist *Religious Herald* featured an editorial entitled "The Mormons": "A correspondent requests information as to the peculiar tenets of this modern sect," explained the editorialist. "We have never seen a copy of the book of Mormon, nor any abstract of their creed upon which we could fully rely, as a fair exposition of their opinions." This candid admission did not, however, prevent the *Religious Herald* from delivering its summary verdict that "the book of Mormon is a bungling and stupid production. . . . It contains some trite, moral maxims, but the phraseology . . . frequently violates every principle and rule of grammar. We have no hesitation in saying the whole system is erroneous."[15]

Incidentally, such striking inattention to the actual content and character of the Book of Mormon, conjoined with undiminished certainty that the book is transparently false and even ridiculous, re-

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11. Campbell, "Delusions," 93 (Kirkham, *New Witness,* 2:106).

12. Campbell, "Delusions," 95 (Kirkham, *New Witness,* 2:106).

13. *Painesville Telegraph,* 22 March 1831 (Kirkham, *New Witness,* 2:99).

14. David I. Burnett, *Evangelical Inquirer,* 7 March 1831, 218, 219 (Kirkham, *New Witness,* 2:112).

15. Cited in Terryl L. Givens, *The Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myths, and the Construction of Heresy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 86.

mains common among its opponents still today. For, as the Catholic sociologist Thomas O'Dea observed nearly fifty years ago, "the Book of Mormon has not been universally considered by its critics as one of those books that must be read in order to have an opinion of it."[16] "I don't need to read a book," one militant agnostic defiantly announced during a recent Internet discussion of the Book of Mormon, "to judge whether it is false or not."

The Second Theory

The fact was, however, that the "perfect ignoramus" Joe Smith had actually produced a substantial and complex book. Moreover, he and his book were acquiring a solid and numerous following. How could this be accounted for? How could someone whose "mental powers" were "extremely limited" have produced a lengthy book and founded a growing new religious faith?

Of course, the Book of Mormon was still beneath contempt. Daniel Kidder's 1842 exposé found it "nothing but a medley of incoherent absurdities."[17] A "bundle of gibberish," wrote J. B. Turner, also in 1842.[18] Those, therefore, who were convinced by it must necessarily themselves be beneath contempt. Speculating in the utter absence of any evidence that Sidney Rigdon and Parley Pratt had converted to Mormonism on the basis of "a jerk, or a twitch, or a swoon," Turner proceeded to comment that "it is indeed difficult to see how any man, especially of a nervous temperament, could read Smith's book through without being thrown into some sort of hysterics. The marvel is, that it should ever have happened otherwise."[19] It "is, unquestionably, one

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

17. Daniel P. Kidder, *Mormonism and the Mormons* (New York: Carlton & Porter, 1842), 330 (Kirkham, *New Witness,* 2:199).

18. J. B. Turner, *Mormonism in All Ages: or, The Rise, Progress, and Causes of Mormonism* (New York: Platt & Peters, 1842), 19 (Kirkham, *New Witness,* 2:186).

19. Turner, *Mormonism in All Ages,* 26 (Kirkham, *New Witness,* 2:188).

of the most unreasonable disgusting works in the English or any other language," declared an 1844 refutation.

> It is less interesting than any thing we have ever seen. . . . filled with such idle vagaries as would disgrace a common scribbler. . . . the most contemptible piece of presumption that has ever come under our own observation, and as an admixture of blackguardism and nonsense we will poize it against the world. It won't bear examination in any point, yet we will proceed in detail.[20]

Time and again, authors of lengthy exposés and refutations felt that they needed to apologize for wasting their own and their readers' time on so palpably ludicrous a subject. Joshua V. Himes at first

> thought [it] best not to take public notice of it . . . as the system was so unreasonable and ridiculous, that no person of good common sense would believe it. But having witnessed the progress of the delusion among some of our respectable citizens, some of whom were considered worthy members of the religious societies to which they belonged, I have felt it my indispensable duty, to use my exertion against its spreading and contaminating influence.[21]

"I would have asked forgiveness from all my readers" for even "noticing" the Book of Mormon, explained Alexander Campbell, "had not several hundred persons of different denominations believed in it."[22] "To make an earnest attack on Mormonism, as if it had any plausible pretensions to credibility," wrote Origen Bacheler in the opening of his earnest 1838 attack on Mormonism, entitled *Mormonism Exposed,* "would argue great want of discernment and good sense on the part of one who might thus assail it. It would be somewhat like a

20. James H. Hunt, *Mormonism: Embracing the Origin, Rise, and Progress of the Sect* (St. Louis: Ustick and Davies, 1844), 14–15 (Kirkham, *New Witness,* 2:183).

21. Joshua V. Himes, prefactory remarks to Campbell's pamphlet "Delusions" (Kirkham, *New Witness,* 2:102–3).

22. Campbell, "Delusions," 91 (Kirkham, *New Witness,* 2:105).

labored attempt to disprove the story of Tom Thumb, or like the attack of Don Quixote on the windmill."[23] The Book of Mormon was, he said, "the most gross, the most ridiculous, the most imbecile, the most contemptible concern, that was ever admitted to be palmed off upon society as a revelation. . . . It has no merit even as a forgery." Its author was a "blockhead."[24]

Still, even if Joseph Smith was nothing but a "blockhead," the Book of Mormon existed, and it grounded a movement that was attracting troubling numbers of converts. Gradually, the skeptics realized that their own first explanation had to be jettisoned as simply implausible. Clearly, therefore, Joseph must have had help. On this, believing Latter-day Saints and their critics could agree. "The gross ignorance of this man," wrote James Hunt in an 1844 exposé of Mormonism, "was looked upon, by his early followers, as his greatest merit, and as furnishing the most incontestable proofs of his Divine mission."[25] But believers and critics parted company on the identity of the helper or helpers.

While most critics suddenly became willing to imagine a conspiracy of considerable size that may or may not have included Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Parley Pratt, it was Sidney Rigdon—an experienced clergyman and Bible student, a Campbellite preacher before his conversion to Mormonism—who was the favored candidate for the role of chief facilitator of what they devoutly believed to be a fraud. The hypothesis received its debut in the granddaddy of all anti-Mormon books, Eber D. Howe's 1834 cult classic, *Mormonism Unvailed*. But Rigdon was not the absolute author of the Book of Mormon, according to this explanation. He was merely "the *Iago*, the prime mover, of the whole conspiracy"[26]—the transmitter, to Joseph Smith, of a manuscript originally authored by one Solomon Spalding, a Dartmouth College–educated former clergyman who had, it was said, expressly declared his disbelief in the Bible before his death in 1816.

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23. Origen Bacheler, *Mormonism Exposed: Internally and Externally* (New York: n.p., 1838), 5 (Kirkham, *New Witness,* 2:159).

24. Bacheler, *Mormonism Exposed,* 36 (Kirkham, *New Witness,* 2:160).

25. Hunt, *Mormonism,* 6 (Kirkham, *New Witness,* 2:182).

26. Eber D. Howe, *Mormonism Unvailed* (Painesville: by the author, 1834), 100 (Kirkham, *New Witness,* 2:131).

Howe described the Book of Mormon as

> unquestionably, one of the meanest in the English, or any other language. It is more devoid of interest than any we have ever seen. It must have been written by an atheist, to make an experiment upon the human understanding and credulity. The author, although evidently a man of learning, studied barrenness of style and expression, without an equal. . . .
>
> The real author, notwithstanding his studied ignorance, was well acquainted with the classics.
>
> . . . the sameness is such, and the tautology of phrases from the beginning to the end of the work, that no one can be left in doubt in identifying the whole with one individual author.[27]

But that author, of course, was no longer "that spindle shanked ignoramus Joe Smith." Now it was the classically educated Solomon Spalding. Howe thought he might even be able to discern in the Book of Mormon the hand of "a fearless infidel" who had "attempted a ridicule upon the Holy Bible," perhaps in a bid "to bring down contempt upon the inspired writers, and the religion of Jesus Christ."[28]

Howe seems to have been aware, though, that he did not have in his possession the evidence that would establish his case. So he hedged his bets. "That there has been, from the beginning of the imposture, a more talented knave behind the curtain, is evident to our mind, at least; but whether he will ever be clearly, fully and positively *unvailed* and brought into open day-light, may of course be doubted."[29] Howe's modesty was compelled by the striking lack of evidence that, today, has led most critics to drop the Spalding manuscript theory of Book of Mormon origins.

None of this stopped some critics from actually manufacturing *ersatz* evidence. In an 1855 book, *The Prophets; or, Mormonism Unveiled,* Orvilla S. Belisle is able to furnish her readers with the transcript of

27. Howe, *Mormonism Unvailed,* 19, 21, 23 (Kirkham, *New Witness,* 2:128–29).
28. Howe, *Mormonism Unvailed,* 54 (Kirkham, *New Witness,* 2:129).
29. Howe, *Mormonism Unvailed,* 278 (Kirkham, *New Witness,* 2:141).

the conversation in which the Book of Mormon plot was hatched. Permit me to quote at length from this invaluable document:

> A conversation between Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon in which they decided upon a plan to print the "Book of Mormon."
>
> "Easily obviated," returned Smith coolly [using the kind of vocabulary, no doubt, that had led everyone around him to regard him as an illiterate blockhead and ignoramus]. "You know I have the 'seer stones,' and I can make them believe I divined it by them, or what is better still, say a 'urium and thumin' of which Spaulding speaks, was discovered with it."
>
> RIGDON: "Nothing could be better, if we could evade discovery. Spaulding, Patterson and I, have read it to numbers of different people, and I am almost sure they would detect us."
>
> SMITH: "You tell me Spaulding and Patterson are both dead, as well as several others who saw it in their possession?"
>
> RIGDON: "Yes, but Spaulding's wife still lives, and she knew its contents perfectly, she could not be deceived."
>
> SMITH: "Perhaps she might," returned the Prophet musingly. "I tell you, Rigdon, the more I think of it, the more possible it appears. We must be cautious, but vigorous and I am sure we shall at least create an excitement that will fill our pockets at last, and raise us above those who have scorned us all our lives."
>
> RIGDON: "Here is the manuscript, but use it carefully, and as you value the success of our schemes let no one see it or know it was ever in your or my possession. And be wary, and not have a vision too often, or you will, by your over zeal, draw down contempt from even the most ignorant."
>
> Long these two worthies communed over their scheme for deception, and when the hours had waned and they had set on a firm basis a train of duplicity that should startle the world, they even then, from the depth of their corrupted hearts, gloated over the consternation one day's work had done at their impious fraud. . . . Their only object at that time

> was to play upon the credulous, earn applause from the debased, and extort money from the simple, under the plea of a divine mission, and thus deceive and rob in a mode of which no law could arraign them for the offense. Pride, ambition and an overweening thirst for power led Smith to concoct the scheme while the most consummate hypocrisy which he had played off on several denominations of Christians, with the hope of rising with the tide, was Rigdon's motive. Honor, integrity and all the nobler passions of the human heart, had been stifled in the breasts of both and now nought remained to stem the new-born crime which should drag their own names to the depths of infamy and enslave in vice thousands of their fellows.[30]

Clearly, we've come some distance from the Joseph Smith whose only expression was one of "dullness," whose mental capacities were "extremely limited," whose family was known only for their general "stupidity." Now, he is a consummate schemer, a fiendishly clever deviser of hellish plots.

The Hurlbut-Howe-Spalding theory—so named to honor its earliest exponent, Doctor Philastus Hurlbut, a former member of the church who became a pioneering anti-Mormon agitator after his 1833 excommunication[31]—dominated skeptical explanations of the Book of Mormon for fifty years, from the publication of *Mormonism Unvailed* in 1834 until 1884. Even the Reverend Alexander Campbell, he who had proclaimed what he considered the obvious fact that the book had been composed in one ignorant cranium, Joseph Smith's, soon proclaimed the obvious fact that Spalding of Dartmouth was the author. The theory was not always consistently held, of course. J. B. Turner, for example, wrote that the Book of Mormon was characterized by "uniformity of style . . . in the highest degree. It is all Joe

30. Orvilla S. Belisle, *The Prophets; or, Mormonism Unveiled* (Philadelphia: Smith, 1855), 53–55 (Kirkham, *New Witness,* 2:202–3; the first sentence of this quotation and the names of the speakers appear in Kirkham's *New Witness* but not in Belisle's *Prophets*).

31. "Doctor" was his given name. He had previously been expelled (for immorality) from the ranks of the Methodists.

Smith, from preface to finis, testimonials and all. *Joe Smith* is sole author and proprietor, as he himself claimed on the title-page of the first edition."[32] Within just a few paragraphs, however, Turner remarked that "Although any blunderhead, with the Bible at his side, might have written the book, and the greater the blunderhead the better, still there are some reasons to believe that Smith is not the original author even of the gibberish that constitutes the plot of the comedy."[33]

That U-turn was too blatant even for Daniel Kidder, Turner's fellow anti-Mormon. "It appears to us," Kidder wrote, "that Professor T[urner] has involved himself in a species of self-contradiction, by maintaining that Joe Smith is the real and sole author of the Book of Mormon, while, at the same time, he proves the identity of that book with the Spaulding manuscript."[34] Moreover, he commented, in direct contradiction to both Professor Turner and the Reverend Alexander Campbell,

> We are . . . far from assenting to the position that unity, either of style or sentiment, prevails throughout the Mormon Bible. Those who had seen Spaulding's MANUSCRIPT say that the religious parts of the Book of Mormon have been added. Now, these parts bear a distinctive character, (that of Campbellism,) which Smith was utterly unqualified to give them until after his connection with Rigdon. This shows that there were at least three parties to the real authorship; and we think it would be sheer injustice not to put Oliver Cowdery, the schoolmaster, upon as good (literary) footing as his more ambitious pupil, Joseph Smith, Jr.[35]

32. Turner, *Mormonism in All Ages,* 202 (Kirkham, *New Witness,* 2:189).
33. Turner, *Mormonism in All Ages,* 204 (Kirkham, *New Witness,* 2:190).
34. Kidder, *Mormonism and the Mormons,* 337 (Kirkham, *New Witness,* 2:200).
35. Kidder, *Mormonism and the Mormons,* 336–37 (Kirkham, *New Witness,* 2:200). The notion that the basic text of the Book of Mormon was merely a secular yarn to which some inessential religious ornamentation was then added reminds me of an experience that a high school friend of mine had many years ago. She found herself attending a Christmas party at the California Institute of Technology, not far from our homes. A very famous Nobel laureate physicist was also present. At one point, conversation turned to C. S. Lewis's science fiction trilogy (*Out of the Silent Planet*, *Perelandra,* and *That Hideous*

That no copy of Spalding's manuscript was available for inspection did no more to dampen enthusiasm for the theory than did such inconsistencies. After all, there seemed no alternative that was both realistic and palatable. The manuscript, devotees of the theory said, had been lost. Or it had been destroyed. Or it had been purchased by the Mormons and suppressed—a plot motif that is still very popular among certain critics today.[36] That Spalding's manuscript was said to have contained a secular romance, designed merely to entertain and perhaps to make a little money, while the Book of Mormon purported to be a solemn religious history, was also dismissed as a trifle. Perhaps Sidney Rigdon, the Campbellite scripturist, had been more than just a conveyor. It scarcely mattered. If it had to be so, it must have been so.

Third Theory

Unfortunately for advocates of the Spalding theory, Spalding's *Manuscript Story* was recovered from a steamer trunk in Honolulu in 1884. It turned out to be a relatively short yarn—roughly 125 pages long—about a group of Romans who set sail for Britain but were driven onto the coast of America by storms at sea. L. L. Rice, the rather surprised owner of the steamer trunk, remarked of the *Manuscript Story* and the Book of Mormon that "There is no identity of names, of persons, or places; and there is no similarity of style between them. . . . I should as soon think the Book of Revelation was written by the author of Don Quixote, as that the writer of this Manuscript was the author of the Book of Mormon."[37]

Strength). The scientist expressed his great admiration for Lewis's novels, excepting, he said, "all that vile religious propaganda." My friend, unintimidated, responded that the physicist's attempt to separate Lewis's religious views from the plot of his novels, as if their association were nothing more than accidental, was absurd. The conversation grew heated, but she held her ground. And she was right.

36. Recently, for instance, Latter-day Saints are said to have gained control of the *Salt Lake Tribune* in a dastardly attempt to suppress honest news coverage in Utah. It scarcely matters that the actual purchaser of the newspaper isn't a Latter-day Saint at all. After all, if supporting evidence for the existence of the conspiracy is lacking, that merely demonstrates how fiendishly effective the conspiracy has been in concealing its machinations.

37. L. L. Rice, letter, 28 March 1885, in Charles A. Shook, *The True Origin of the Book of Mormon* (Cincinnati: Standard, 1914), 68 (Kirkham, *New Witness*, 2:210).

Faithful adherents of the Spalding theory now claimed that a second work, *Manuscript Found,* was the real source of the Book of Mormon. Fortunately or unfortunately, it could not be examined because nobody knew where it was. Nor *whether* it ever was.

Today

Fawn M. Brodie, though a devout disbeliever in the Book of Mormon and the claims of Joseph Smith, effectively sounded the death knell of the Spalding theory in her 1945 biography of the Prophet, entitled *No Man Knows My History.* She argued, instead, that Joseph Smith was the consciously fraudulent author of the book, which reflected his own personality and environment. The dull village idiot was now "a mythmaker of prodigious talent."[38] She was, of course, following more or less in the footsteps of I. Woodbridge Riley, whose 1902 profile of the *Founder of Mormonism* explained the Book of Mormon on the basis of a psychological analysis of Joseph Smith, who, Riley said, was subject to epileptic fits that were somehow supposed to account for his "visions."[39] But Brodie and most everybody else discounted the claim of epilepsy. The trail had also been blazed for her by Harry M. Beardsley's 1931 *Joseph Smith and His Mormon Empire,* in which Joseph was portrayed as a paranoiac.[40] In 1948, the Reverend James Black also explained Joseph Smith as mentally ill, a "dissociated personality."[41]

"Thus," summarized Kirkham, surveying the scene in the early 1940s, "Joseph Smith is first a money digger, then an ignoramus, then a deluded fanatic, then a vile deceiver, a fraud, then an epileptic, a paranoiac, then a myth maker of prodigious talents. Finally he is not an ignoramus, he is not a deceiver, rather a person with a dissociated personality."[42]

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38. Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History,* 2nd ed. (New York: Knopf, 1971), ix (Kirkham, *New Witness,* 2:420).

39. See I. Woodbridge Riley, *The Founder of Mormonism: A Psychological Study of Joseph Smith, Jr.* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1902).

40. See Harry M. Beardsley, *Joseph Smith and His Mormon Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Riverside, 1931).

41. James Black, *New Forms of the Old Faith* (London: Nelson and Sons, 1948), 248.

42. Kirkham, *New Witness,* 2:232.

Kirkham predicted that, in an age of greater ecumenism and—though he could not have used the phrase—*political correctness,* the hateful assaults on Joseph Smith that had been so acceptable in the nineteenth century would virtually disappear from favor among mainstream critics. The growing respectability of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints would lead to a more civil though no less determined critique. And the collapse of the Spalding theory would bring explanations full circle, back to Joseph Smith as the author of the Book of Mormon.

> The personality of Joseph Smith, his learning, his environment, will be assumed and described by various writers to meet the requirements of his ability to produce the book and to organize the Church. Historical facts that must be accepted in the actual writing and printing of the Book of Mormon will be interpreted by the coming writers to meet their various theses explaining the contents of the Book of Mormon. These writers will disagree concerning important assumed facts but they will all deny the possibility of divine aid in the translation of the ancient record.[43]

Kirkham has been proven correct. Of course, some extreme anti-Mormons invoke demonic inspiration to account for the Book of Mormon.[44] A few still seek to resurrect the authorship of Solomon Spalding. The venerable John L. Smith of Marlow, Oklahoma, continues to labor away at a manuscript that will demonstrate Sidney Rigdon to be the real author of the Book of Mormon.[45] And, at intermittent intervals

43. Kirkham, *New Witness,* 2:232–33.

44. A particularly zany example of this approach is Loftes Tryk, *The Best Kept Secrets in the Book of Mormon* (Redondo Beach, CA: Jacob's Well Foundation, 1988), reviewed in Daniel C. Peterson, "A Modern *Malleus maleficarum,*" *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 3 (1991): 231–60.

45. John L. Smith alluded to his project from time to time in the *Evangel,* a monthly publication of Utah Missions, Inc., in Marlow, Oklahoma, which he founded. Since his ouster from that operation a few years ago, he has continued to refer to his future Rigdon book within the pages of the *Newsletter,* published by his new countercult venture, The Ministry of John L. Smith, also located in busy Marlow. The *cognoscenti* who savored Pas-

on one message board, an anonymous Internet critic of Joseph Smith triumphantly points to an anonymous individual or group of individuals, possessed of considerable learning—familiar, for example, with rare maps of inner Arabia, acquainted with Semitic languages, conversant with contemporary Protestant theology and preaching, well-read in classical Arabic belles lettres—and jurisprudence—who somewhere, sometime, and for unknown motives, composed the Book of Mormon and then for some undiscoverable reason permitted Joseph Smith to publish it as his own. (Professor William Hamblin and I call this mysterious group "The Illuminati," in honor of their remarkable capacity to be everywhere, and to do and know everything, while remaining entirely invisible.)

But among serious writers of a disbelieving bent, the pendulum has clearly swung back to Joseph Smith as the author of the Book of Mormon. In the foreword of Robert N. Hullinger's 1980 *Mormon Answer to Skepticism: Why Joseph Smith Wrote the Book of Mormon* (republished in 1992 by the ever-helpful Signature Books in response to no discernible public enthusiasm for it), the Reverend Wesley P. Walters depicts Joseph as "a defender of God . . . motivated by the noble desire to defend revealed religion" against the inroads of Deism.[46] (Gone is the once-obvious fact that the author of the book was a Christianity-mocking atheist.) Hullinger explicitly acknowledges that he is turning his back upon the theories of his own mentor, George Arbaugh, whose 1932 *Revelation in Mormonism,* published by the academically prestigious University of Chicago Press, had confidently divided the text of the Book of Mormon—which, to Alexander Campbell, had been so obviously a single-authored unity—into portions written by either Solomon Spalding, Sidney Rigdon, or Joseph Smith. John Brooke, in his immensely entertaining Cambridge University Press book *The Refiner's*

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tor Smith's semiautobiographical fantasy novel *Brigham Smith* await his book on Sidney Rigdon with eager anticipation.

46. Wesley P. Walters, foreword to *Mormon Answer to Skepticism: Why Joseph Smith Wrote the Book of Mormon,* by Robert N. Hullinger (St. Louis, MO: Clayton, 1980), xi, reviewed in Gary F. Novak, "Examining the Environmental Explanation of the Book of Mormon," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 7/1 (1995): 139–54.

Fire, presents a Joseph Smith who was a late exemplar of Renaissance hermeticism and various occultic traditions.[47] Jan Shipps[48] and at least the early Dan Vogel, following Brodie, emphasize Joseph's supposed fascination with explaining Indian mounds. Robert Anderson's *Inside the Mind of Joseph Smith* reads the Book of Mormon psychobiographically, claiming to see Joseph working out his own interior problems in the text.[49] A similar approach is William Morain's *The Sword of Laban: Joseph Smith Jr. and the Dissociated Mind*.[50] The famous Yale literary critic Harold Bloom, failing to notice that Joseph Smith was nothing more than a typical backwoods "blunderhead," calls him a "religious genius" and places him in the American pantheon alongside Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman.[51]

Vogel and Metcalfe's *American Apocrypha* further illustrates the historic inability of Book of Mormon critics to agree on much of anything except that the Book of Mormon is false. Not long after its appearance, in fact, one of the editors of *American Apocrypha* explicitly, huffily, and repeatedly refused to answer a simple question on an Internet message board as to whether Joseph Smith believed that he possessed metal plates or knew that he did not—which seems the kind of question that any skeptic's fundamental theory of Book of Mormon origins must answer very early on. He would not, he said, lower himself to thinking in such simple-minded categories.

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47. John L. Brooke, *The Refiner's Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644–1844* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994). William J. Hamblin, Daniel C. Peterson, and George L. Mitton, "Mormon in the Fiery Furnace or, Loftes Tryk Goes to Cambridge," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 6/2 (1994): 3–58, betray a disturbing lack of faith in Brooke's claims.

48. Jan Shipps, "The Prophet Puzzle: Suggestions Leading toward a More Comprehensive Interpretation of Joseph Smith," *Journal of Mormon History* 1 (1974): 11–12, 16.

49. Robert D. Anderson, *Inside the Mind of Joseph Smith: Psychobiography and the Book of Mormon*, reviewed in Michael D. Jibson, "Korihor Speaks, or the Misinterpretation of Dreams," *FARMS Review of Books* 14/1–2 (2002): 223–60.

50. William D. Morain, *The Sword of Laban: Joseph Smith Jr. and the Dissociated Mind* (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Press, 1998), reviewed in Richard N. Williams, "The Spirit of Prophecy and the Spirit of Psychiatry: Restoration or Dissociation?" *FARMS Review of Books* 12/1 (2000): 435–44.

51. Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 80, 96.

His approach is manifest in the book he coedited. While the authors all seem to agree, broadly, that Joseph Smith was the sole or principal author of the Book of Mormon, there are notable disagreements about the how and the why.

Edwin Firmage's essay, for example, depicts Joseph Smith as a rather cunning and deliberate fraud, making it all up on the fly, with major plot elements seemingly created on the basis of virtually sudden whims, resulting in serious inconsistencies in the book.[52] Susan Staker also offers a Joseph Smith who creates the Book of Mormon rapidly, on the basis of swiftly mutating ideas whose evolution—driven by his own changing circumstances—is apparent within the text itself.[53] George D. Smith seems partially to agree. He uses a highly debatable reading of B. H. Roberts to argue, indirectly, that Joseph drew upon Ethan Smith's *View of the Hebrews* in order to compose the Book of Mormon—a method that seems to demand more careful plotting (in at least two senses of that word) than Firmage and Staker allow.[54] David Wright, in what is by far the most academically rigorous essay in the book, likewise posits a careful and wholly conscious Joseph Smith, but one who, in this instance, bases at least a substantial part of his Book of Mormon on a close but misguided reading of King James Isaiah.[55] Dan Vogel's second essay presents Joseph as composing an anti-Masonic tract, attuned to the controversy that ensued upon the murder of Captain William Morgan in 1826.[56] He is every

52. Edwin Firmage Jr., "Historical Criticism and the Book of Mormon: A Personal Encounter," in *American Apocrypha,* 1–16.

53. Susan Staker, "Secret Things, Hidden Things: The Seer Story in the Imaginative Economy of Joseph Smith," in *American Apocrypha,* 235–74.

54. George D. Smith, "B. H. Roberts: Book of Mormon Apologist and Skeptic," in *American Apocrypha,* 123–55.

55. David P. Wright, "Isaiah in the Book of Mormon: Or Joseph Smith in Isaiah," in *American Apocrypha,* 157–234, reviewed by John A. Tvedtnes, "Isaiah in the Bible and the Book of Mormon," in this number of the *FARMS Review,* pages 161–72.

56. Dan Vogel, "Echoes of Anti-Masonry: A Rejoinder to Critics of the Anti-Masonic Thesis," in *American Apocrypha,* 275–320. For recent responses to one of Vogel's standard arguments on this topic, see Paul Mouritsen, "Secret Combinations and Flaxen Cords: Anti-Masonic Rhetoric and the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 12/1 (2003): 65–77; and Nathan Oman, "'Secret Combinations': A Legal Analysis," *FARMS Review* 16/1 (2004): 49–73.

bit as confident in this assertion as Eber D. Howe was in *his* earlier explanation, according to which Solomon Spalding, who died in 1816, was said by Howe, who heard it from Doctor Philastus Hurlbut, who claimed to have heard it from Spalding's widow nearly two decades after Spalding's death, that Spalding didn't like Freemasonry. Howe concluded that this explains the Book of Mormon's references to the Gadianton robbers and other "secret combinations."[57]

All these depictions of the Book of Mormon as a work of fiction directly collide with the testimonies of the Three and Eight Witnesses. Accordingly, those testimonies must be destroyed. So, in his first essay in *American Apocrypha,* although Vogel grants their honesty, he seeks (rather desperately, in my opinion) to explain them away. Their experiences were merely subjective, internal, hallucinatory.[58] Joseph Smith was a hypnotist—a very fortunate one in the fact that, although only a relatively small proportion of the general populace is readily susceptible to hypnosis, *all* of Joseph's witnesses were easy marks. But perhaps, Vogel casually suggests in a throwaway line at the end of his essay, Joseph also created some tin plates with which to dazzle the yokels.[59] (The invocation of this secondary prop may indicate that Vogel himself, to his credit, is not entirely persuaded by his "subjective hallucination" thesis.) But once we've posited a previously unnoticed Deseret Custom Design Metal Foundry operating under Joseph's management on the outskirts of Palmyra, that industrial concern also needs to produce the breastplate seen by various witnesses, as well as the brass plates, the Urim and Thummim, the sword of Laban, and the Liahona. One wonders how many skilled metallurgists and craftsmen were available in the area at the time, what the local wage scale was, and why nobody ever seems to have reported the noise and the belching smoke of Joseph's fraud-producing furnaces.

And then we read Scott Dunn's essay, according to which Joseph Smith created the Book of Mormon by a process of automatic writ-

57. See Kirkham, *New Witness,* 2:142.

58. Dan Vogel, "The Validity of the Witnesses' Testimonies," in *American Apocrypha,* 79–121.

59. Vogel, "Validity of the Witnesses' Testimonies," 108.

ing. It just flowed out of him. Joseph was dissociative but sincere, and Dunn vigorously denies that "conscious fraud" was involved. In fact, the dictation process was probably scarcely "conscious" at all, in any normal sense of the word.[60]

If Dunn is right, Firmage and Vogel are wrong.

What is more, mutually contradictory accounts are not mutually reinforcing. Quite the contrary. They weaken each other.

Imagine a murder case in which one witness for the prosecution definitively states that he clearly saw the defendant, Mr. John Jones, who was wearing his characteristic Stetson cowboy hat, empty a six-shooter into the head of the victim, Miss Roberta Smith, at point-blank range, as she stood by the hot dog stand on the beach. A second prosecution witness declares that he saw the defendant, Mrs. Joanna Jones, striding briskly out of the twenty-seventh floor restaurant where the murder took place, with a fashionable black beret on her head. The prosecution's forensic pathologist, meanwhile, announces his expert verdict that, from the marks on Mr. Robert Smith's throat, the victim died of strangulation.

No reasonable person would conclude from such testimony that, with three such witnesses for the state, the guilt of the defendant had been established beyond reasonable doubt. Indeed, equipped only with evidence of that character, the prosecution wouldn't even bother to seek an indictment and could never in its remotest fantasies dream of conviction.

Many years ago, Albert Schweitzer published a classic work entitled, in English, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus,* in which he demonstrated, among other things, that the various portraits of Jesus that had been offered up to his time by scholars of Christian origins most commonly said more about their authors than about the historical Jesus.

What we see in the various attempts that have been offered thus far to explain the Book of Mormon away might, I think, be labeled the Quest for the Historical Joseph. Early critics, absolutely unwilling to

60. Scott C. Dunn, "Automaticity and the Dictation of the Book of Mormon," in *American Apocrypha,* 17–46; quotation on p. 29.

grant that God might have had a hand in the production of the Book of Mormon, sought its author in Joseph Smith, Sidney Rigdon, Parley Pratt, Oliver Cowdery, or anybody else who might serve them as a refuge against the book's own claims. "How often have I said to you," remarked Holmes to Watson, "that when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth?"[61] The Book of Mormon's claims for itself were, to many minds, simply unendurable, and so other theories have necessarily prospered.

It is so still today. Only, now, the most serious criticisms of the Book of Mormon tend to come not from self-proclaimed orthodox Christians, but from self-identified atheistic materialists. The historian Dale Morgan, much admired in certain contemporary cultural Mormon circles, wrote a 1945 letter to the believing Latter-day Saint historian Juanita Brooks in which he stated the fundamental issue with unusual frankness and candor:

> With my point of view on God, I am incapable of accepting the claims of Joseph Smith and the Mormons, be they however so convincing. If God does not exist, how can Joseph Smith's story have any possible validity? I will look everywhere for explanations except to the ONE explanation that is the position of the church.[62]

Regarding the Book of Mormon, the editors of *American Apocrypha* acknowledge "the book's interesting and impressive literary, theological, psychological, and spiritual qualities that have had such a profound impact on people."[63] It is refreshing to find some critics now acknowledging the Book of Mormon's once universally denied merits. Nonetheless, they deny the factual truth of its narrative.

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61. Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Sign of Four* (London: Blackett, 1890), chap. 6.

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

63. "Editors' Introduction," ix.

> Is the Book of Mormon pseudonymous? We think so. Apocryphal? Yes. Is it therefore less able to touch people's hearts? No. Our position is that the scriptural tradition includes fiction—parables, poetry, hyperbole, psalms, historical verisimilitude, and other genres—and that such writing can be as powerful in providing people with spiritual guidance as non-fiction. To acknowledge the obvious fictional quality of the Book of Mormon is not to detract from the beauty and brilliance of the sermons, visions, and other imagery.[64]

One is tempted, though, to ask how much spiritual guidance the editors themselves actually find in the book. Speaking to a Sunstone symposium audience on 5 August 2000, Brent Metcalfe identified himself to his audience, as he has described himself on numerous occasions over many years, as an "atheist."[65] Similarly, Dan Vogel announces in the introduction to his recent portrayal of Joseph Smith that he views "any claim of the paranormal"—which must surely include prophethood—as either "delusion or fraud" and that he sees no evidence whatever for what he terms "the supernatural."[66] "At heart," he writes,

> I am a rationalist and naturalist. I believe that the physical universe follows natural law, that it does not behave in supernatural or contradictory ways, that it functions without supernatural forces, and that it is unnecessary to go outside nature to explain what takes place within it.[67]

But how can those who deny the existence of spirits speak meaningfully of "spiritual guidance"? More to the point, it would surely seem that much if not all of the Book of Mormon's supposed spiritual power is available only to those who believe its claims about itself and

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64. "Editors' Introduction," ix.

65. His self-characterization can be heard on the official Sunstone tape of the session (SL 00 #331).

66. Dan Vogel, *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2004), xii.

67. Vogel, *Joseph Smith,* 570 n. 39.

act on the basis of such belief. Yet, on the point of view offered up by *American Apocrypha,* those who do so are, quite literally, fools.

Does the language of *American Apocrypha*'s editors ("the scriptural tradition," "powerful," "spiritual guidance," "the beauty and brilliance of the sermons") represent anything more than window dressing? What does it offer, besides a spoonful of sugar that will help the medicine of atheism or agnosticism go down?

The Present *Review*

I would like to say a word about two of the essays in the present number of the *FARMS Review.*

First, A. Don Sorensen's "The Problem of the Sermon on the Mount and 3 Nephi" represents the firstfruits of what I hope will be a continuing if occasional practice of publishing older essays—essays that are largely inaccessible and, very likely, previously unpublished—that we deem of lasting interest. In such cases, we will generally make no systematic effort to bring these items up to date with current literature, which might often prove tantamount to rewriting them.

Second, Matthew Roper's essay on "Limited Geography and the Book of Mormon" demonstrates beyond reasonable dispute that the geography of the Book of Mormon has been open to speculation by both leaders and ordinary members of the church since the book was first published in 1830. Furthermore, Roper's essay establishes, contrary to the claims of certain critics, that the so-called limited geographical model of the Book of Mormon was born long before Amerindian DNA became an issue, and, even, considerably prior to the rise of scientific Mesoamerican archaeology. It cannot, therefore, be dismissed as merely a desperate ad hoc response to developments in genetics over the past few years or to the supposedly threatening results of recent field excavations.

Nonetheless, in view of recurrent misunderstandings and distortions of the "FARMS position" on Amerindian DNA and the Book of Mormon, as well as on limited geographical models of the Book of Mormon, I feel obliged to state as clearly as I can that nothing in

Roper's essay should be taken to imply or entail a claim that Amerindians generally (that is, beyond the limited geographical confines of the Book of Mormon story) are not really Lamanites. Limited geographical models do not restrict the descendants of the Lamanites to a small area of Mesoamerica. It is entirely conceivable—indeed, it is virtually inevitable—that gradually, over the centuries, undetermined numbers of the descendants of the Jaredites, Lehites, and Mulekites moved out of the region covered by the Book of Mormon narrative. Common sense tells us that this must have been so, but there are even indications of such movements in the text itself. Although, for obvious reasons, we are told nothing about it in the Book of Mormon itself, the Lamanites clearly have a history after the disastrous end of the overall Nephite story in AD 421. But so, too, do at least some Nephites. For example, Nephite survivors of the final battle fled southward (Mormon 6:15). Additionally, there were an unknown number of migrations northward, to territories largely or entirely beyond the horizons of the Book of Mormon, in the first century before Christ (Alma 63:4–10; Helaman 3:3–16). Finally, the story of Zelph and Onandagus to which Roper alludes, to the extent that it tells us anything at all, surely refers to personalities (including, apparently, a major prophet) and a place ("the plains of the Nephites") that do not figure in the Book of Mormon story.[68] Very possibly they belong to a time or a place, or both, beyond the ken of the mainstream Nephite record keepers. Of this diaspora of Book of Mormon peoples—how far they traveled, with whom they and their posterity intermarried—we can say virtually nothing. But the miraculous power of intermarriage to spread "descent" over time suggests that all, or virtually all, Amerindians may well be related to one or more of the peoples described in the Book of Mormon.[69]

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68. See Matthew Roper, "Limited Geography and the Book of Mormon: Historical Antecedents and Early Interpretations," in this number of the *FARMS Review,* pages 225–75.

69. See Brian D. Stubbs, "Elusive Israel and the Numerical Dynamics of Population Mixing," *FARMS Review* 15/2 (2003): 165–82; and Matthew Roper, "Swimming in the Gene Pool: Israelite Kinship Relations, Genes, and Genealogy," *FARMS Review* 15/2 (2003): 159–63.

Editor's Picks

And now, as mandated by venerable tradition and dictated by underwhelming popular demand, I list some of the items treated in the present number of the *FARMS Review* and append my own (inescapably subjective) ratings to them. (Items reviewed herein that fail to appear in this list do so, simply, because we found ourselves unable to recommend them.) The ratings were determined in consultation with the two associate editors and the production editor of the *Review,* but the final responsibility for making the judgments is mine. As I have noted previously, the specific ratings are somewhat arbitrary and could easily have been different. More firm is the distinction between what we recommend and what we do not.

This is the scale that we use in our rating system:

**** Outstanding, a seminal work of the kind that appears only rarely

*** Enthusiastically recommended

** Warmly recommended

* Recommended

Here, then (the tension and anticipation having mounted to dangerous levels), are the recommendations from this number of the *FARMS Review:*

*** Douglas E. Cowan, *Bearing False Witness? An Introduction to the Christian Countercult*

*** John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann H. Seely, eds., *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem*

** David E. Bokovoy and John A. Tvedtnes, *Testaments: Links between the Book of Mormon and the Hebrew Bible*

** Douglas J. Davies, *An Introduction to Mormonism*

** Alonzo L. Gaskill, *The Lost Language of Symbolism: An Essential Guide for Recognizing and Interpreting Symbols of the Gospel*

** Avraham Gileadi, *Isaiah Decoded: Ascending the Ladder to Heaven*

* Ed J. Pinegar and Richard J. Allen, *Teachings and Commentaries on the Book of Mormon*

I wish to express my gratitude to all those who have worked on this number of the *FARMS Review*. Above all, I thank the writers, volunteers all, for their unpaid work. Emily Ellsworth, Paula Hicken, Margene Jolley, Jennifer Messick, Linda Sheffield, Amanda Smith, and Gina D. Tanner did our source checking and proofreading. Mary M. Rogers and Jacob Rawlins did the typesetting. The *Review*'s production editor, Shirley Ricks, was, as always, indispensable and marvelously competent. Professor David McClellan provided expert opinion on a technical point, Noel B. Reynolds advised us on one of the essays, and Matthew Roper helped in locating some of the sources for this introduction. Alison V. P. Coutts, FARMS's director of publications, read through all the essays, offering valuable suggestions, as did the *Review*'s two associate editors, Louis C. Midgley and George L. Mitton. Nonetheless, the opinions and interpretations expressed herein remain those of the authors. They are not necessarily those of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, and they are not necessarily those of the editors. I hope, however, that they are interesting, thought-provoking, and useful.