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A Caricature of the Church

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Chapter 1 A Caricature of the Church

*“You’re killing me, Smalls” (Ham Porter, *The Sandlot*).*

“Operation Mincemeat”

On April 30, 1943, a fisherman off the coast of Spain spotted a badly decomposed body floating in the ocean. The corpse was pulled aboard. The man’s uniform pegged him as a British officer in the Royal Marines and the contents of his wallet identified him as Major William Martin. Curiously, Martin’s cadaver still had an attaché case handcuffed to his wrist. Because this all took place smack in the middle of WWII, the fisherman was quick to turn the body and the still-attached briefcase over to the authorities.

When the authorities pried open the attaché case they discovered top secret military documents that discussed Allied plans to invade Greece and Sardinia. Eventually the papers were given to the Germans who examined the documents and mobilized their military to defend against the Allied attack.

The Germans, however, had been bamboozled. The body’s identity and the contents of the man’s wallet and attaché case were a ruse—a hoax cleverly created by the British intelligence with input from Ian Fleming (the creator of the James Bond stories). “Major Martin” was, in reality, a homeless man who had been found dead in an abandoned warehouse. The deceased man had no immediate family and had died from eating rat poison (either by suicide or from hunger).

British intelligence created a very real identity with bogus but persuasive possessions for their Trojan Horse. Major Martin’s personal possessions included fictitious ticket stubs, unpaid bills, a letter from an imaginary father, and a photo of his imaginary fiancé. Martin’s body had no signs of bruises and it appeared that he had drowned in the sea. All the evidence suggested that Major Martin was this man’s real identity and that the documents he was carrying were authentic Top Secret British war-planning documents. The Germans were wrong; the ploy—dubbed “Operation Mincemeat”—worked, and the Allies pushed through Sicily where resistance was minimal.

Just as the corpse of Major Martin bamboozled the Germans, so likewise the CES Letter has bamboozled a number of Latter-day Saints. Both are scams that cleverly rely on not only subterfuge but they strategically maneuver *real data* to create evidence for a story they want their targets to believe. The man was a real human who died; the photo of the woman in the wallet was of a real young lady; the attaché case was real; the handcuff was real. In the case of the CES Letter most of the points of data discussed are real as well. Like Major Martin’s story, the CES Letter looks real and reasonable on the surface and seems to be verified by science and scholarship. Both, however, are mere illusions—admittedly clever illusions—which have fooled critical thinkers and skeptics as well as laypersons.

“By Grabthar’s Hammer, by the suns of Worvan, you shall be avenged.” (Sir Alexander Dane, *Galaxy Quest*)

In an effort to help those Latter-day Saints who have been troubled by the information discussed in the CES Letter, this brief booklet intends to show the real character behind the illusion. I assume the reader is already familiar with the contents and claims of the CES Letter and I don’t plan to address each accusation in great depth—this has already been done by my associates at FairMormon.org (see this page for detailed discussions of each topic or a new FairMormon “Closer Look” at the CES Letter here). For those of you who don’t know FairMormon, it’s an all-volunteer organization (of which I am proudly a member) dedicated to helping Latter-day Saints who are struggling with the faith or for investigators who are searching for *our side* of the story when it comes to challenging issues.

I’ve also engaged most of these topics to a much greater degree in my book *Shaken Faith Syndrome: Strengthening One’s Testimony in the Face of Criticism and Doubt* and I’ve also pointed out the many evidences which support a position of belief in my book *Of Faith and Reason: 80 Evidences Supporting the Prophet Joseph Smith*.

This booklet responds to some of the more egregious problems with the CES Letter’s interpretation of the data and also demonstrates that there is room to understand these topics from within a framework that accepts modern prophets, the restoration, and divine influence in recording and preserving the scriptures. Because this is a relatively small book, I did not include a lot of endnotes (like I typically do in my other books or my on-line articles)—I tried to keep this brief and easy. I also tried to keep it light—at least as light as possible considering the nature of the overall subject. The general topic is, of course, serious.

I believe that Christ stands at the head of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, that it is led by a prophet, and that the scriptures are divinely inspired writings that help us return to God. Productions like the CES Letter concern me because I know they can create heartburn in the spiritual stomachs of some members—this is going to happen when you eat a habanero pepper that you thought was a cherry tomato. If we take some *Prilosec* and remove the pepper seeds, however, the pepper may no longer burn. Likewise I’ve found that preventative measures (or inoculation—teaching the hard stuff in faithful settings) and pulling the teeth from the bite (demonstrating that the strength of the critics’ arguments are weak at best) can protect, restore, or even strengthen a testimony.

Although I recognize the seriousness of this issue, I can’t but wonder if God has a sense of humor. Joseph Smith had a great sense of humor; so did President Kimball, and so does President Uchtdorf. While I strictly avoid making light of serious and sacred topics, I can’t help but poke a little fun at our human natures when we think, argue, or discuss some of these serious topics. In my defense of the Church, I hope my attempts at humor don’t offend any readers (...of course maybe they should—isn’t the saying, “the best defense is a good offense”?)

First, a couple of important general points:

It's easier to make an accusation than to refute an accusation.

According to some conspiracy theorists, the Moon Landing was a hoax and they claim that photos supposedly taken on the Moon support their theory. Photos taken of the Earth, for example, don't show stars in the background. Photos of the American flag on the Moon show a banner in mid-flap despite the fact that there is no air on the Moon. In one photo a Moon rock appears to have the letter "C" stamped on the side—an obvious sign that this was simply one of many stage props. There are cogent and logical answers to these claims, but it takes many more pages of ink to explain why these evidences have no merit than it takes to make the accusations in the first place. The same is true with the charges against LDS beliefs. It's easy to make a quip, snippet, or to write a couple of paragraphs which claim to destroy the beliefs held by others, but it takes a lot more effort and explanation to counter such claims.

Smart people don't always agree with each other.

There are smart atheists, Baptists, Catholics, Muslims, Buddhists, and yes, Mormons. Smart people don't always agree—in fact, they often disagree. There are, for example, also smart Republicans, Democrats, Libertarians, and even Communists. You might think that the other guy or gal is an idiot. You may be convinced that they don't have a clue about how the real world works or what is best for our country—and you may have good arguments to support your convictions—but the reasons you maintain your views and reject theirs are typically not because you are smarter than they are.

Intelligent people can all agree that $2+2=4$, that water freezes at 32 degrees Fahrenheit, and that a dropped rock will fall toward your toes. Intelligence and rationale are not enough alone, however, to determine that there is or isn't a God, that the Bible was written by divinely inspired prophets, or that Joseph Smith communed with God and translated an ancient American record. There is no silver bullet to kill all other arguments and no universally acceptable "proof" that will convince all people that one position trumps all others. Psychologists and neuroscientists tell us that we don't always think purely rational thoughts or that all most of our decision making—even on important life-changing issues—is determined by sheer intelligence. And we can't escape this problem because it's simply part of our human nature.

Which brings us to our next issue....

The strength of evidence is often a matter of interpretation.

In the late 1980s and 90s various individuals and groups distributed information requesting that concerned citizens sign a petition to ban the use of *dihydrogen monoxide*. This compound, they accurately explained, is a major component of acid rain, industrial solvents, and fire retardants. If inhaled—even in small quantities—it can lead to death. Its gaseous form can cause severe burns, and prolonged exposure to solid dihydrogen monoxide can cause severe tissue damage. It leads to soil erosion and oxidation of many metals, and is often found in the biopsies

of pre-cancerous tumors and lesions. In modern times it has been discovered in both city sewage waste systems and city aqueducts which supply drinking water.

One molecule of dihydrogen monoxide is composed of two hydrogen atoms and a single oxygen atom, with the chemical formula of H₂O—more commonly known as “water.” That’s right, dihydrogen monoxide is *water*. Various individuals and groups have taken advantage of the lesser known, more scientific-sounding name to prank the gullible public. The fact is, that all of the negative aspects about water—noted above—are true. No right-minded person would ban the use of water, but they could be fooled into signing a petition to ban dihydrogen monoxide if they were duped by only looking at its negative aspects.

Critics, including those who created the CES Letter, similarly spin an overall negative picture of the Church by only listing what they see as the negative aspects of Mormonism (which, as my booklet will show, are debatable). Not only is the overall picture framed in bad light, but each individual accusation is interpreted and presented in the most negative way possible in the hopes that they will be able to accrue enough unfavorable features about Mormonism—like the list of negative qualities of dihydrogen monoxide—that someone who doesn’t know better will accept those interpretations as representative of the big picture.

There are often various ways to look at different problems, data, or research. These differing perspectives often yield different conclusions. Now, to clarify, I’m not claiming that all truth is relative. I believe that there are a great number of absolute truths. The Earth is nearly spherical, gravity (in ways we don’t fully understand yet) is responsible for dropping things on your toes and making aging body parts sag. It’s not arguable that the United States had a past president named John F. Kennedy who was assassinated. There are debates, however, that question if *every* political position he pursued was in the best interest of the country.

I’m a firm believer that there were actual Lehitites that traversed the Arabian Peninsula and eventually came to the Americas. I think that there are some very suggestive evidences from archaeology and anthropology which correlate well with the Book of Mormon. Critics do not, of course, agree with the strength of the evidences. Critics believe that there are some very suggestive evidences from nineteenth-century American history which correlate well with the view that Joseph Smith was a fraud. I find such evidences to be weak and ultimately unconvincing.

Sometimes powerful evidence doesn’t have any real impact on someone’s acceptance or rejection of a proposition. Some criminals—even those who were guilty of heinous crimes—have been set free because they had good lawyers who knew how to impeach powerfully damning evidence against their client. Likewise, in the past decade a number of men who had previously been convicted for murder or rape have been released from prison because modern DNA evidence has vindicated them.

It’s not that intelligent people hide their heads in the sand when presented with evidence, but rather that in life there are evidences that point “to” as well as “away” from a number of issues. We rarely have “proof” for the things we believe to be true. We are forced to interpret evidence based on what we see as the strength of the evidence, as well as how it fits other evidences, and also how it answers conflicting evidences.

Fans of the CES Letter like to crow about instances where those who defend Mormonism agree with their arguments. The creators of the CES Letter, in fact, claim that FairMormon disagrees with only 21% of the CES Letter. Because, according to their calculations, FairMormon remains neutral on 51% of the letter and agrees with 28% of the letter, tacitly FairMormon agrees with 79% of the CES Letter.

Such a conclusion is, quite frankly, astounding and it's hard to understand how anyone could take such a declaration seriously. It is, unfortunately, taken seriously by a number of believers and skeptics thanks to some clever sleight of hand (see the "Mincemeat Operation" above). When I wore a younger man's clothes (for you Billy Joel fans) I liked to play with magic—card tricks, coin tricks, etc. I was never really good at it, but it *was* a lot of fun. Even a mediocre magician can fool very intelligent people with a bit of misdirection and carefully planned maneuvers.

CES Letter devotees also argue that FairMormon agrees 100% with the CES Letter's section pointing out that Joseph Smith used a rock in a hat to translate the Book of Mormon (see #15 below). But is that *all* that is claimed by the CES Letter in regards to the Book of Mormon translation process? Does the CES Letter state or imply that the Book of Mormon is the Word of God, translated by a prophet *who used a rock in a hat*? No, of course not. Instead, the CES Letter *interprets* the "rock in the hat" as proof of fraud. The CES Letter, for example, states:

In other words, he [Joseph Smith] used the same "Ouija Board" that he used in his days treasure hunting....

...I'm now supposed to believe that Joseph has the credibility of translating the keystone Book of Mormon? With a rock in a hat?

...And I'm supposed to believe with a straight face that Joseph using a rock in a hat is totally legit? Despite this being the exact same method he used to con people out of their money during his treasure hunting days?

You see, the CES Letter is not just a laundry list of facts, of data that speaks for itself. The CES Letter interprets the data as evidence for the overall conclusion it is trying to promote—that the Church is false. In the conclusion of the CES Letter we read how this data is interpreted:

We're talking about dozens of serious issues that undermine the very foundation of the LDS Church and its truth claims.

According to the CES Letter the interpretation of the data "undermine[s]" the truth claims of Mormonism. Do you suppose that FairMormon *agrees* with this interpretation? If not, then why would the CES Letter claim to have such high percentages wherein FairMormon *agrees* with the CES Letter? Quite frankly those responsible for claiming that FairMormon agrees with 79% of the CES Letter should be embarrassed.

No serious scholar would (I hope) confuse *data* with *interpretation of data*. A number of people whom I count as my friends (and I think they feel the same about me) are critics of the

Church. Many of these critics are scholars in their own right. They have done the necessary research and have tried—as best as humanly possible—to apply scholarly methods to their works. I would be shocked if they would concede that FairMormon *agrees* with 79% of the CES Letter. They would accurately understand that FairMormon might agree with 79% of the data (if that is even a realistic number) but would differ significantly on the *interpretation of the data*.

Carol walks into her apartment and sees their neighbor Kyle kneeling over the bloody corpse of her husband Tom. Kyle is also covered in blood and has a knife in his hand. *That* is the data. Did Kyle kill Tom? *That* is the interpretation of the data. While it certainly appears that Kyle stabbed Tom to death, Kyle claims that he heard screams, ran over and found Tom lying on the floor dying with a knife sticking out of his chest. Kyle instinctively pulled out the knife, got sprayed with blood, and was in the act of desperately trying to save Tom's life when Carol walked in. Carol remains unconvinced. Kyle didn't like Tom. She's sure that Kyle committed the murder.

Which interpretation is the most accurate? That depends on other information that may come from outside of the original data—and that's why we have courts and trials to ascertain which interpretation is more accurate. If Carol and Kyle went to court because they both had different interpretations of the murder, would it be fair and honest to say that the defense *agreed* with the prosecution? They both would agree on the data but would disagree on the interpretation of the data.

The majority of the topics addressed in the CES Letter are issues involving historical inquiry—they are issues about past events, comments, and actions of early LDS leaders. We can't see into the past. We *must* interpret the data of the past in order to construct a picture of what was taking place. The late Dr. Edward W. Said, a one-time professor at Columbia University, once explained:

All knowledge that is about human society, and not about the natural world, is historical knowledge, and therefore rests upon judgment and interpretation. This is not to say that facts or data are nonexistent, but that facts get their importance from what is made of them in interpretation. ...For interpretations depend very much on who the interpreter is, who he or she is addressing, what his or her purpose is in interpreting, at what historical moment the interpretation takes place.¹

When the CES Letter makes outrageous claims—like that FairMormon agrees with 79% of the CES Letter—they show, in my opinion, their absolute lack of objectivity or acumen. I can see only two reasons they would make such a bogus claim: 1) They rely on blatant and willful legerdemain (sleight of hand) or 2) Their overconfidence exhibits naïve and uninformed exuberance. Perhaps there is another option but it's hard to imagine one. Neither of these two options—duplicity or incompetence—offers much confidence in the scholarly conclusions of the CES Letter.

Because I like to consider the best in people's motives, my suspicion leans to academic ineptitude. It should quickly be noted that ineptitude doesn't necessarily mean that all conclusions or arguments are automatically to be rejected—bad arguments can be formed to support true conclusions and good arguments can lead to erroneous conclusions—but it should, at least, suggest

that readers apply a bit of skepticism before swallowing whole the arguments presented in the CES Letter.

The peril of black and white assumptions.

Every person makes assumptions every single day because we don't have the time or energy to examine every single piece of data that comes our way. The brain of every normal human is wired to make quick and automatic decisions in order to navigate through life. This automatic process leads us to look for patterns. Visually, black and white patterns are very easy to see—there is a distinct and sharp boundary between the opposing shades of contrast.

The innate pattern-seeking process of our brains extends beyond things we see, however. We also automatically seek patterns to help us understand more complex things in our lives, such as stories, theories, and beliefs. Because we are not naturally aware that we form our thoughts on these patterns, we don't typically realize that many of our thoughts are instinctively categorized in black and white patterns as well.

“I’ve never eaten sushi before, but I had it for lunch yesterday and got sick that night. The sushi made me sick.” While it's possible that the sushi was responsible for making you sick, it's also possible that you got food poisoning from the ice cream you had with your friends after eating the sushi. Or maybe you actually had a 24-hour stomach virus. Your brain, however, automatically sees a black and white pattern: Sushi is a new food to your stomach; your stomach got sick; ergo, sushi is bad.

Unfortunately, this habit of thinking in black and white instinctively rides shotgun in our brains even when we contemplate topics with more sophisticated data, such as sports, politics, or religion. When we apply black and white assumptions to matters of greater importance, we often take an either/or stand without realizing that the truth may lie somewhere in-between.

The scriptures are true, the prophet speaks the Word of God, and faith can move mountains. These things are all true, but they are not completely true—there are degrees of subtlety and nuance to each of these and many more gospel topics. What does it mean to say that the “scriptures are true?” Does this mean that every letter, word, idea, story, and historical perspective is 100% factually precise and conveys fully and literally all the information the reader needs to know without any ambiguity? If not, where is the line? Is it a hardline or a line that changes according to scriptural author, time frame, and context?

From my observation, black and white thinking typically stems from an absence of information. This doesn't mean we're dumb; it just means that we can't be experts on everything. All of us are less informed on a great number of things, otherwise we'd all be trying to get on the game show *Jeopardy*.

Not only does every human make instinctive black and white assumptions that can lead to misunderstandings, but unfortunately, most people (and especially most Americans) are not really knowledgeable about history. Poll after poll has shown that Americans are, in general, sadly unfamiliar with some of the more important events in not only American history, but also world

history. The problem extends to the average Latter-day Saint when it comes to Church history. Many of us are familiar with the basic historical accounts taught in Church, or in Seminary, or in Institute classes, but relatively few Latter-day Saints have really taken much interest in pursuing the greater historical knowledge that comes from more in-depth historical studies (many of which are produced by Church-sponsored organizations or by believing and faithful members).

When dealing with testimonies and testimony crisis I have found that testimony damage is not necessarily brought on by additional information by itself, but rather by a barrage of negatively-interpreted information that is added to our data banks when we don't have all the information and assume that things can be viewed in black and white. The defense for a damaged testimony is not less information, but actually *more information*. As Joseph Smith said, "I have always had the satisfaction of seeing the truth triumph over error, and darkness give way before light."²

The Devil is in the details

As the Swamp Castle King says in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, "This is supposed to be a happy occasion. Let's not bicker and argue about who killed who." It would be wonderful if I didn't feel a need to write a book like this; I could spend more time hiking and taking pictures. Unfortunately, however, it's a fact that life is hard. People get hurt, physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

I don't doubt that the author of the CES Letter is sincere and believes that the Church is false. His story, sadly, is not unique. He discovered troubling information that sent his religious worldviews into a downward spiral. The arguments listed in the CES Letter indicate that this author, like many people in the world today, instinctively approached his beliefs from within a black and white framework. This framework unfortunately created a stumbling block to an accurate assessment of the troubling issues and ultimately contributed to a collapse in testimony.

Hurt by feelings of betrayal, and believing that the Church had lied, the author probably created the CES Letter with sincere hopes of helping other people get out of the same situation. As discussed in #1, however, facts don't speak for themselves. They must be interpreted, and the CES Letter seems to intentionally twist every interpretation to maximize a negative portrayal of the Church. Unwary members who haven't yet entertained a religious worldview that sees the various shades of gray in understanding prophets as mere mortals with divinely-called positions, can be conned, scammed, bamboozled, and victimized by a storm of scholarly-sounding negative interpretations that seem to undercut their beliefs.

From my experience there will be at least four different reactions from those who read the CES Letter. Some will roll their eyes and believe that the Letter spews anti-Mormon nonsense. Their testimonies will be unscathed. For some, curiosity will be piqued but they will not (at least not immediately) diverge from their normal course. Their testimonies might feel a tremor or may later become shaken. Others will have hearts broken and, believing the worst, will exit the Church (either officially or unofficially). Their testimonies will be shattered. Finally, members like myself will react with dismay—not dismay for ourselves, but dismay for those who lose their path because they can't see through the mists of darkness created by the CES Letter.

For most people, the accusations in the CES Letter come out of the blue—they are new, troubling discoveries which create spiritual and intellectual heartburn. For people like me, the CES Letter doesn't shed any new light on Mormon topics—it's all old claims that have been around for decades if not longer. Old arguments are obviously not, by definition, impotent arguments. The very fact that the CES Letter has damaged at least a few testimonies demonstrates that, for many members, these topics still can pack a wallop.

I wish I didn't have to "bicker and argue about who killed who," but because I'm among those who have seen all of this stuff before I feel obligated to share my thoughts. People like me have had our turn at the heartburn, but came to recognize that the information by itself—left uninterrupted by critics—does not demand that we resign our beliefs. Having recognized that there is more to the story, we have discovered that we didn't always have a clear understanding of Mormon teachings or Mormon history. We've come to learn that—when it comes to understanding history as well as human interaction with God—there is more gray than black and white.

This doesn't mean that the Gospel is gray or complicated. On the contrary. The Gospel is simple and is adapted to all who desire to taste of God's goodness—even if they are weak in mind or spirit. The Gospel is simple so that those who desire, who put their faith in God, can feel the Spirit even if they are unable to understand or explain why the plates were written on metal, or why Joseph was commanded to practice plural marriage, or why Moses cursed the Egyptians with plagues. The Gospel is simple because the rest of the stuff can be confusing and ambiguous.

The gray areas inconvenience our understanding of history, of human cognitive skills, of motives, assumptions, and of the weaknesses inherent among all humankind. My worldview—my paradigm—allows for the humanness of prophets as well as the divine hand of God in guiding those prophets. In fact, when understood properly, I believe this awareness can aide us in understanding how God works through imperfect mortals such as ourselves. This amazing and joyful news gives hope that there is salvation even for a "wretch like me" (*Amazing Grace*).

So in the next chapter I'll begin examining most of the claims made in the CES Letter—and please remember that this is a *booklet*. In the interest of space and the desire to hopefully keep readers from dozing off, I'll touch only briefly on each topic. Before I get into a point by point examination, however, I need to point out a few caveats of my own:

1) My numbering system is not the same as the numbering system in the CES Letter. I've tried to follow the same flow as we find in the CES Letter but I've also discovered two things about the number of concerns (or supposed problems) listed in the CES Letter:

2) At the time of this writing, The CES Letter lists 14 primary "Concerns" about Mormonism. Each of these primary categories has multiple sub-category concerns. Some of these subcategory concerns include concerns within the text that are not necessarily numbered. I've tried to answer the majority of unique concerns discussed in the letter.

3) A number of the subcategory or individual concerns within each subcategory are repeated multiple times in the CES Letter. It's hard not to see this as intentional. The same issues are mentioned sometimes back to back, or repeated again later in the letter. It gives the illusion

(intentionally or unintentionally) that there are many more troubling issues (or more evidence for troubling issues) than we might find if we pared down the unique arguments and evidences. "...at the *Derek Zoolander Center For Kids Who Can't Read Good And Wanna Learn To Do Other Stuff Good Too*, we teach you that there's more to life than just being really, really, really good looking" (as if more than one "really" makes one better looking [from the movie *Zoolander* if the quote was too subtle]).

4) Some of the original questions are paraphrased or pared down. Those who are interested in fuller treatments can find what they are looking for on FairMormon.org.