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## The Challenge of Historical Consciousness: Mormon History and the Encounter with Secular Modernity

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# The Challenge of Historical Consciousness: Mormon History and the Encounter with Secular Modernity

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Martin E. Marty, distinguished Professor of the History of Modern Christianity at the University of Chicago, has made an important contribution to the understanding of "the crisis in Mormon historiography."<sup>1</sup> I will set forth his arguments and examine their soundness. I will also show that on most issues this most esteemed American church historian is close to the position I wish to advance, and that his stance is more refined and better grounded than that taken by historians who fashion naturalistic explanations of the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith's prophetic claims. Marty's analysis of what is currently being discussed by Mormon historians constitutes both a clarification of key issues upon which there has been some confusion, and a sound starting point for further clarification.

In spite of the narrow focus of Marty's essay, he manages to describe a quandary of faith among Mormon historians that is older than the two decades in which the writing of Mormon history has become professionalized. The crisis which he describes, which he seems to see as rather recent, has actually been unfolding for half a cen-

ture. The first signs of an exigency over the Mormon past reached the attention of the Saints with the publication in 1945 of *No Man Knows My History*, Fawn M. Brodie's notorious biography of Joseph Smith,<sup>2</sup> which began as an attack on the Book of Mormon,<sup>3</sup> and eventually constituted a full-scale naturalistic explanation of Joseph Smith's prophetic claims. Set over against such efforts were various essays by Hugh Nibley, who after 1948 became the primary intellectual champion of the truth of the Book of Mormon, including both its message and historical authenticity, and also for the related prophetic claims of Joseph Smith. His understanding of the restored gospel manifests a disdain for secular fundamentalism, an ideology which, by the end of World War II, had decoyed almost an entire generation of Latter-day Saint intellectuals, as well as an aversion to the sentimental sectarian fundamentalism found in much American conservative religiosity.<sup>4</sup>

The current spate of Revisionist accounts,<sup>5</sup> and the ensuing discussion of their implications and coherence, which indicate for Marty a "crisis in Mormon historiography," are not always as forthright or elegant as the work of earlier internal dissenters like Brodie or Dale L. Morgan.<sup>6</sup> Still, in subtle ways these accounts entail the transformation of Latter-day Saint faith by the use of naturalistic terms and categories to interpret the Mormon foundational texts and events. And they spring from a desire to reach an accommodation with modernity, and especially with elements of secular fundamentalism—the naturalistic ideology which has dominated the understanding of divine things in academic circles since the Enlightenment.<sup>7</sup> The historiographical crisis which Marty examines has only recently drawn serious attention from those either inside or outside the Mormon community,<sup>8</sup> even though it is clearly rooted in older struggles, and it somewhat resembles an older debate that has taken place in Christian and Jewish communities. Though the details of those older debates

are not immediately relevant to Marty's analysis of "the crisis of Mormon historiography," it seems to me that what is at stake in the current debate is nothing less than the content and even the possibility of faith as Latter-day Saints have known it. I wish to show that the founding events and texts—Joseph Smith's prophetic claims and the Book of Mormon—are now being discussed and debated in an academic arena in which a struggle is being waged for the control of the Mormon past, and that this struggle is central to the faith. To see why this is so and to grasp exactly what is at stake, I will now turn to Marty's analysis.

### **Scandal, Controversy, and Crisis**

Professor Marty understands Mormon faith to be characterized by a "thoroughly historical mode and mold"<sup>9</sup> that opens it to both inquiry and controversy. Joseph Smith told a strange story. Was it the truth? If he was the victim of illusion or charlatanry and his message false, ultimately we have nothing that places us in touch with deity. But if he told the truth, and if the foundational texts like the Book of Mormon are genuine, then we have something. History is therefore the arena in which the truth claims of the restored gospel have been contested. Those who have received the Book of Mormon and the story of Joseph Smith's prophetic gifts have found therein the grounds for faith in God. Others do not receive the message, and, according to Marty, "there have been Mormons who left the faith because their view of the historical events which gave shape to it no longer permitted them to sustain it."<sup>10</sup> The Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith's story are clearly a stumbling block, but they also furnish the grounds for a distinctive community of memory and faith.

As the writing of Mormon history in the last two decades has moved from cottage to academic industry, Marty believes that the discussion of the historical foundations of faith has grown in both intensity and urgency<sup>11</sup> to the

point where it has now reached a critical stage. Some of the questions now being debated concern the very core of the faith. "Mormon thought is experiencing a crisis comparable to but more profound than that which Roman Catholicism recognized around the time of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65)."<sup>12</sup> The Catholic crisis was dogmatic; the Mormon agitation is historical in the sense that it involves the understanding of the historical foundations of the faith.<sup>13</sup>

The reason for the crisis of faith among some Mormon historians, according to Marty, is that a "faith attached to or mediated through historical events has always had some dimensions of an 'offense' or 'scandal' to the insider just as it has been *only* that to the outsider who despises."<sup>14</sup> Some find unseemly the account of Joseph Smith's prophetic gifts, visits with angels, the Book of Mormon and other revelations. But why should the ferment now reach inside the community and touch the faith of some intellectuals? It was inevitable, according to Marty, since the Mormon faith is thoroughly historical in "mode and mold,"<sup>15</sup> that this kind of crisis would overtake some Saints as they confront their past under the impact of the assumptions at work behind some elements of secular culture. The primary source of the present crisis of faith is the appropriation by some historians of competing or conflicting ideologies that began to dominate the thinking of educated people beginning with the Enlightenment.<sup>16</sup> The crisis is rooted in conflict between the substance of Mormon faith, especially the prophetic claims upon which it rests, and certain of the dominant ideas found in the secular culture. Prophetic claims appear questionable, if not absurd, from the perspective of secular modernity, which also provides the ideological grounds for both rival explanations of the faith, and competing secular accounts of the meaning of life.

Marty maintains that the current crisis centers on the

attempts of certain Latter-day Saint historians to assess the historical foundations of the faith in the light of categories and assumptions borrowed from the larger culture. Naturalistic or secular explanations may compete with the content of faith and may also provide intellectual justifications for unbelief. The crisis is not generated by the discovery or publication of texts; new texts only complicate or enhance the picture of the Mormon past. The difficulties arise in the way texts are to be understood, and this always involves assumptions brought to the task by the historian. The crisis is, therefore, not a difficulty forced on Latter-day Saint historians by some dramatic discovery that suddenly unravels the truth claims of the faith. Marty describes the difficulty confronting Mormon historians as a crisis of understanding, and hence of faith, and not of history as such.<sup>17</sup>

Marty correctly rejects as “trivial the question of whether the faith is threatened by the revelation of human shortcomings” of the Mormon people or its leaders.<sup>18</sup> This question raises public relations and pedagogical issues, or what he calls “political embarrassments” or merely “borderline religious issues.”<sup>19</sup> As important as such issues may appear to be, “intellectually these are not of much interest.” Marty attempts to “cut through all the peripheral issues”<sup>20</sup> that plague the discussion of the history of Mormon things in order to address what is really at stake. He shows that the crisis centers on the way the founding events are to be understood—it is not a crisis brought on by the dazzling refutation of something essential to the faith, though it centers on the understanding of Joseph Smith’s gifts, special revelations, and the Book of Mormon.

The substance of the current discussion is traced by Marty to the impact on Mormon historians of certain of the dominant ideas of the larger culture. He holds that both the content as well as the possibility of faith are linked to the way the past is understood. He correctly insists that

“if the beginning . . . , the First Vision and the Book of Mormon, can survive the crisis, then the rest of the promenade follows and nothing that happens in it can really detract from the miracle of the whole. If the first steps do not survive, there can be only antiquarian, not fateful or faith-full interest in the rest of the story.”<sup>21</sup> This is a clear statement of the decisive issue in the current controversy generated by fashioning new naturalistic (or secular) understandings on the crucial foundations of Mormon things.

### **The Acids of Modernity**

Marty grants that there has been no proof that Joseph Smith was a fraud or the victim of an illusion or delusion or that the Book of Mormon is fiction;<sup>22</sup> there is only a crisis of faith. The roots of this crisis he traces to ideologies that began corroding Protestant and Roman Catholic piety with the Enlightenment. According to Marty, the challenges to the historical foundations of the faith of the Saints are analogous to those corroding Christian and Jewish faith. In other essays, he describes the challenges to Christian faith from “modernity,”<sup>23</sup> a term commonly used to describe a cluster of related, though also competing, secular ideologies that distinguish the Modern from the Pre-Modern world.<sup>24</sup> He uses the expression “acids of modernity”<sup>25</sup> to describe “the process of corrosion which affected the vessel of apostolicity.”<sup>26</sup> Modernity yields scientism—a new secular religion of science, as well as the ideologies that dislodge God from history and the world generally. Modernity eventually comes to full fruition in the writings of Marx, Nietzsche, Darwin, and Freud—the so-called “God-Killers.”<sup>27</sup>

Modernity includes the new understandings of history that challenged the historical foundations of biblical faith, as well as the rise of an historical consciousness which plunged all elements of culture into a sea of relativity. The source of the malaise, instead of being religion within the



limits of reason alone that challenges the claims of historically grounded and mediated faith, becomes the historicist belief in the relativity of all positions, especially those resting on special revelations, and even of those grounded in unaided human reason. It is not that the truths of history cannot be demonstrated; even that understanding of truth, from the perspective of historicism, is itself only a part of the perpetual flux of ideas in history.<sup>28</sup>

The "crisis of historical consciousness" that Marty believes has "cut to the marrow in the Protestant body of thoughtful scholars in Western Europe in the nineteenth century"<sup>29</sup> continues to trouble the Christian world. The crisis is analogous to the one which the Saints are now facing as they emerge from a prereflective naiveté about their past. One of the chief sources of the crisis is a remnant of Enlightenment-grounded fear of superstition. The assault on Christian piety also came from ideologies linked to an historical consciousness which began "to relativize Christian distinctiveness in the face of other ways."<sup>30</sup> Modernity thus includes the Romantic reaction to the Enlightenment, commonly known as historicism.

Modernity includes other ideologies that have found their way into the hearts and minds of historians: "In the nineteenth century," according to Marty, "the age of modern critical history, the crisis of historical consciousness became intense and drastic. Now no events, experiences, traces, or texts were exempt from scrutiny by historians who believed they could be value-free, dispassionate. Today, of course, no one sees them as being successful in their search. They were tainted by radical Hegelian dialectics, neo-Kantian rigorisms, or the biases of a positivism that thought it could be unbiased."<sup>31</sup> All this now seems naive, but it was once "highly successful at destroying the primitive naiveté among those who read them seriously."<sup>32</sup> Marty traces the crisis among Mormon historians to ideologies with roots going back to the Enlightenment: to con-



confidence in reason and fear of superstition, to naive positivist notions of historical objectivity, to the historicist insistence on the relativity and hence equality of all faith or of all religions. But these ideologies have now fallen on hard times. Should these intellectual fashions of the past serve as the foundation for the understanding of the Mormon past? On that issue he is silent.

Elsewhere, Marty both describes and expresses apprehension about the wanton capitulation of believers to the fashions of modernity. He has made the delicious irony of the various encounters between the faithful and modernity the core of his interpretation of American religiosity. He also argues persuasively that Christian faith, whatever its content and contours, has a legitimate place in the doing of history.<sup>33</sup> The corrosive effects of modernity have an impact on diverse types of religiosity in different ways. The particular "aspect of modernity" that has generated the current crisis of faith among some Mormon historians "has to do with the challenge of modern historical consciousness and criticism," which, he maintains, is rooted in what he calls "the burden of history" that "confronts Mormons most directly."<sup>34</sup>

Christians who confronted the corrosive ideologies of the nineteenth century responded in various ways. Marty describes the range of these responses. "Some lost faith," he explains, as they felt the pull of what was earlier described as a secular fundamentalism. While others, according to Marty, found ways of affirming their faith in some seemingly more satisfactory manner; others transformed the content of faith to accommodate secular ideological pressures, and some turned to "defensive fundamentalisms,"<sup>35</sup> which were earlier labelled sectarian fundamentalism. Yet, when Marty examines the impact of modernity on Mormon historians, he does not acknowledge the same range of responses.<sup>36</sup> His account would have been more balanced and complete – more coherent –

if he had examined the full range of responses to the crisis of faith among Mormon historians. These, as will be shown, have issued as dissent and denial, or loss of faith, or radical alterations to the content of faith to accommodate certain competing ideologies in revisionist accounts. But in some notable cases it has yielded more adequate accounts of the Mormon faith and its history.<sup>37</sup> Unfortunately, Marty neglects to carry through on the range of alternatives set forth in his analogy.

The crisis, Marty realizes, does not involve secondary or peripheral issues<sup>38</sup> like polygamy or the faults of the Saints, or their leaders. His discussion is focused on “*generative* issues.”<sup>39</sup> The primary question concerns the veracity of Joseph Smith’s “theophanies” and “revelations.” Joseph’s epiphanies—the prophetic charisms, visits with angels, and the seer stones, are linked to the founding revelation—the Book of Mormon. These work together to constitute “a single base for Mormon history. When historians call into question both the process and the product, they come to or stand on holy ground.”<sup>40</sup> If the revelations do not survive “there can be only antiquarian, not fateful or faith-full interest in the rest of the story.”<sup>41</sup> The primary issue becomes a combination of two related questions: Was Joseph Smith a genuine seer and prophet, and is the Book of Mormon true? If either one or the other is true, because both are linked, the truth of the other is thereby warranted. Marty insists that the primary questions must be answered in the affirmative for there to be more than antiquarian curiosity concerning the Mormon past. Hence a fateful response to the Mormon past depends upon those founding events being simply true. “To say ‘prophet’ made one a Saint” and to deny or reject the prophetic claims “is precisely what made one leave Mormonism or never convert in the first place.”<sup>42</sup>

### **Fashioning a More Socially Acceptable Past**

The “stark prophet/fraud polarity”<sup>43</sup> troubles Marty. Asking if Joseph Smith was a genuine prophet exerts a chilling effect on discussions between believers and sympathetic unbelievers, and it seems unlikely that it is a question that can be resolved to the satisfaction of everyone. In any case, most historians do not wish to concentrate on that particular question. Perhaps a different way of formulating the fundamental question might facilitate attention to secondary issues with which historians, especially those in the grasp of modernity, would feel somewhat more comfortable. Marty struggles to move outside of or “beyond the prophet/fraud issue addressed to generative Mormon events.”<sup>44</sup> But he also explains why Joseph Smith’s claims are such that they demand either a prophet or a not-prophet answer. When dealing with the generative events, Marty senses that one cannot have it both ways.

Yet, Marty strives to avoid the old prophet/fraud dialectic, while still addressing Joseph Smith’s prophetic claims. He has proposed two ways to do this. First, historians might simply bracket or suspend the question of whether Joseph Smith was a genuine prophet and the Book of Mormon an authentic ancient history. They could do so in order to deal with what Marty calls “a new range of questions,” which include: “what sort of people are these people [who believe such things], what sort of faith is this faith, what sort of prophet with what sort of theophany and revelation was Joseph Smith?”<sup>45</sup> The primary question can be bracketed in order to inquire into secondary questions. But whether it is possible to deal with those “other questions” without an implicit answer on the primary issue coming into play has not been discussed, let alone settled.<sup>46</sup>

Marty also holds that it is unlikely that historians are going to disprove Joseph Smith’s prophetic claims. They “may find it possible to prove to their own satisfaction that

Smith was a fraud,"<sup>47</sup> but may have difficulty convincing others that they have succeeded. In any case, "the issue of fraud, hoax, or charlatanry simply need not, does not, preoccupy the historical profession most of the time,"<sup>48</sup> but that is not to say that it does not occupy the attention of historians some of the time, or that the opinions historians form on the truth of Joseph Smith's prophetic claims do not wield a subtle influence on answers to the questions that preoccupy them most of the time. Marty admits that those historians who attempt to bracket the question of the truth of Joseph Smith's claims are still "nagged or tantalized"<sup>49</sup> by it. The answer to the question of whether Joseph Smith was a genuine prophet and the Book of Mormon true may influence if not control what they make of the rest.

The second way around the question of the truth of Joseph Smith's prophetic claims has been fashioned by some Latter-day Saint historians who have started asking "more radical questions than before. They had to move through history and interpretation toward a 'second naïveté' which made possible transformed belief and persistent identification with the people. They brought new instruments to their inquiry into Mormon origins."<sup>50</sup> Marty grants that these historians, no doubt, have achieved a "transformed belief" through their "interpretation."<sup>51</sup> The product of such transformations could well be called revisionist history. For them the historical events which shaped their faith no longer sustain it, and yet some "remained with the Mormon people" for various reasons. They have, he feels, "made their own adjustment."<sup>52</sup> Hence some Mormon historians have experienced the corrosive power of the ideological acids of modernity, but they still desire "persistent identification with the people" of their own faith.<sup>53</sup>

"They brought new instruments to their inquiry into Mormon origins,"<sup>54</sup> and instead of charging Joseph Smith

with fraud, pictured him as a sincere though superstitious rustic with a genius for expressing the religious concerns of his age. He was a mystic, a magician, a myth-maker who eventually managed to found a new religious tradition. The new revised standard version differs from the old standard version in that it does not accuse Joseph Smith of fraud or deceit, as did the line of critics running from Alexander Campbell through Fawn Brodie and Dale Morgan. Instead, the revised standard version sees in Joseph Smith an inventive, conflicted, dissociative, sincerely superstitious sayer or magus. This is, of course, one possible way around the "prophet/fraud dialectic."<sup>55</sup> But the revised standard version ends up denying the historical foundations of the faith, and with them it also compromises Joseph Smith's prophetic claims — there can be no equivocation on that issue. To begin to understand the foundations as essentially mystical,<sup>56</sup> mythical,<sup>57</sup> or magical<sup>58</sup> is to deny that they are simply true. Why is that so?

Abraham Joshua Heschel, from the Hasidic tradition, has examined the range of possible explanations of special revelations. For Heschel, one who confronts the core message of the Bible is presented with certain claims. "The problem concerning us most is whether revelation has ever taken place," and again, "Is revelation a fact? Did it actually take place?"<sup>59</sup> Heschel finds that "there are only three ways of judging the prophets: they [a] told the truth, [b] deliberately invented a tale, or [c] were victims of an illusion. In other words, a revelation is either a fact or the product of insanity, self-delusion, or a pedagogical invention, the product of a mental confusion, or wishful thinking [that is, an outgrowth of 'the spirit of the age'] or a subconscious activity."<sup>60</sup> The so-called "New Mormon History," in its secularist mode,<sup>61</sup> entertains or embraces one or more of these alternatives but without always carefully considering whether they are inimical to a faith-full response to the Mormon past.

Marty describes three approaches to religious history that can be used to explain the Mormon past that go “beyond the prophet/fraud issue [and that can be] addressed to generative Mormon events.”<sup>62</sup> The first approach includes what he calls “consciousness” studies or psychological explanations of Joseph Smith that would “make plausible the prophethood and throw light on prophetic character.”<sup>63</sup> Both Klaus J. Hansen and Lawrence Foster have turned to psychological explanations *after* flatly rejecting the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith’s prophetic claims.<sup>64</sup> The second approach is most attractively presented by Jan Shipps. She strives to avoid the question of whether Joseph Smith was a genuine prophet. She believes, according to Marty, that the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith’s story are “best understood in the context of his sequential assumptions of positions/roles that allowed the Saints to recover a usable past” by linking the Saints with ancient and true Israel through mythical histories, that is, through what is essentially fiction – the Book of Mormon – which Joseph Smith either knowingly or unknowingly fabricated. “That was his *religious* function and achievement.”<sup>65</sup>

Shipps holds that “as far as history is concerned, the question of whether Smith was prophet or fraud is not particularly important.”<sup>66</sup> But to make that question seem unimportant, for historians, is not the way to suspend unbelief in order to enter into understanding, or to bracket questions about truth. Obviously it is not important whether Joseph Smith was a genuine prophet in the history that is done by one with only an antiquarian curiosity about Mormon things. Nor does it make a difference whether the Book of Mormon is true or whether Joseph was a genuine prophet from an essentially historicist perspective.<sup>67</sup> Though her recent book is insightful, especially about the place of the Book of Mormon in the faith of the Saints, and she approaches her subject matter with sympathy, Shipps



does not manage to suspend unbelief; she merely makes questions of truth seem irrelevant to her questions. Her approach does not genuinely allow the possibility that the Book of Mormon is simply true.

But, of course, from the point of view of the believer or potential believer the question of whether Joseph was a genuine prophet and whether the Book of Mormon is true makes all the difference in the world. Shipps correctly insists that the Saints cannot finally *prove* that the Book of Mormon is true or that Joseph Smith was a prophet. From that she wrongly concludes that the Book of Mormon “has never lent itself to the same process of verification that historians use to verify ordinary accounts of what happened in the past. The historicity of the Book of Mormon has been *asserted* through demonstrations that ancient concepts, practices, doctrines, and rituals are present in the work.” However, she claims that “such demonstrations point, finally, only to plausibility. Proof is a different matter.”<sup>68</sup> Historians, from her point of view, provide proofs, that is, those who are objective (and not mere apologists for the “myths” of faith) deal in proofs and not just plausibilities; they may seek “intellectual verification” and try to know “what really happened.”<sup>69</sup> On this issue she is simply wrong, for plausibility is about as good as one might expect from any historical account or explanation. But from her vantage point, *real* historians tell us what *really* happened in the past by providing *proofs*, while believers are seen as in thrall to a mythical or fictional past which apologists for the faith can render only plausible.<sup>70</sup>

### **The Question of the Integrity of Faith**

Marty does not examine the background assumptions at work behind the history done by Hansen, Hill, Foster and Shipps. Instead, he merely bestows “integrity” on both the radical mythological and psychological accounts of Mormon foundational texts and events. But he also ad-

mits that such accounts have obviously “transformed belief.”<sup>71</sup> Both what is believed and the belief itself have been radically altered when the story of Lehi and his people is understood as fictional and the messenger with the plates transformed into merely crude magic,<sup>72</sup> or into a product of a dream of surcease of a troubled rustic with the urge to prophesy, or into an expression of mysticism, or when the message or teachings of the Book of Mormon are seen as Joseph Smith’s own imaginative effort to deal with sectarian controversies in his own time through expansions on various theological themes in biblical fashion.

Marty’s “two integrities” identify first, the integrity of the faith that a child might have (or an entirely unreflective adult) and, second, the integrity of one whose faith has survived an encounter with ideas in the outside world which compete with the content of faith.<sup>73</sup> This more mature faith – Marty’s “second naiveté” – has faced and overcome doubts brought on by the confrontation with the secular fundamentalism of modernity. The crisis he depicts is the turning point in which either the desire for faith or the presence of faith, or both, eventually disappear in a loss or denial of faith, or are affirmed in a more complete and mature faith. When the soul of the troubled one is healed of unbelief by a new and deeper affirmation of faith, one could speak of a new secondary integrity. But such an integrity cannot exist if the essential grounds and content of faith are compromised. In such a case there would be no genuine faith, but only denial or loss of faith or perhaps what Marty calls a “transformed belief” in which an alien content has taken the place of faith. This has to be the reason Marty holds that the “generative events” (the Book of Mormon and the special revelations flowing from the prophetic gifts) must survive for there to be a “fateful or faith-full” response to the Mormon past. “If the first steps do not survive, there can be only antiquarian, not fateful or faith-full interest in the rest of the story.”<sup>74</sup>

His “two integrities” identify a condition of soundness of faith that stands on either side of the crisis of faith. The crisis is clearly centered in the heart and mind of those charmed as well as troubled by modernity.

A puzzling thing about Marty’s essay is the attention he gives to the work of Shipps and Foster. Neither is a Latter-day Saint, and neither entertains the possibility that the Book of Mormon is authentic history. Standing outside the faith, they are at their best when they ask, for example, how the Book of Mormon functions in the life of believers. From their perspective the Book of Mormon is fiction, or what Shipps calls “myth,” and not a genuine historical reality. And one would expect no more from even a sympathetic outsider. But why should Marty wish to draw attention to their work? Has either Shipps or Foster really fashioned ways in which troubled Latter-day Saint historians might resolve their own crisis of faith? Presumably, from Marty’s perspective, they have. Yet, at the same time, he seems to move beyond, and perhaps even to dismiss, their approaches in favor of another way of understanding and doing history.

Shipps did not invent her account of a “usable Mormon past” – she borrowed the outlines from Marvin S. Hill. She drew upon his opinion that there is a kind of middle ground somewhere between genuine prophet and fraud. Presumably such a stance would somehow avoid the old quarrel over the truth of the Mormon faith. Hill provided Shipps with a seemingly scholarly Latter-day Saint peg upon which to hang her new explanation of “Mormonism.” She has, however, moved away from her earlier claim that Joseph Smith was a typical mystic and the Book of Mormon a typical mystical text – the explanations with which she began her own career; she now holds that he began as a magician and, eventually, also became a powerful myth-maker.<sup>75</sup>

Hill has tried to work out an explanation of the story

of the Book of Mormon and an account of Joseph Smith's prophetic claims that would find room somewhere between the prophet or fraud alternatives.<sup>76</sup> His argument runs as follows:

In attempting a psychological explanation of Smith rather than that of daring deception, the mature Brodie seems to be telling us that her old interpretation was too simple. Perhaps what Brodie may have recognized at last is that her original interpretation perceived Joseph Smith in falacious [*sic*] terms, as either prophet in the traditional Mormon sense or else as a faker. Her original thesis opens considerable room for speculation because its either-or alternatives were precisely the same as those of the early Mormon apologist and missionary, Orson Pratt.<sup>77</sup>

Fawn Brodie thought that the key to Joseph Smith was the Book of Mormon.<sup>78</sup> Once one determined that the Book of Mormon was fiction, the rest involved working out a plausible explanation of how and why Joseph made it up. Brodie played with a number of different explanations for the Mormon imposture. In 1959, Hill seems to side with an explanation that he labeled the "Smith hypothesis" that comes out against the view that the Book of Mormon is an authentic history. In setting forth the idea that the Book of Mormon was Joseph Smith's romantic fiction, Hill attempted to discredit the work of Hugh Nibley on the Book of Mormon.<sup>79</sup> Hill's version of the "Smith hypothesis" was a sketchy modification of the account already worked out by Fawn Brodie in *No Man Knows My History*. Following a line of explanations that began with Alexander Campbell,<sup>80</sup> she tried to show that Joseph Smith's claims were fraudulent—her "Joseph" began with a tale which only later took on the trappings of religion. Hill has striven to locate what he called in 1974 a "broad, promising middle ground" between the traditional alternatives of genuine prophet or faker-fraud.<sup>81</sup> Hill's account, like that of Shippis, rests on

the assumption that Mormon things must be explained in "naturalistic terms."<sup>82</sup> When that is done, prophetic claims are clearly made to fit within the category of delusion or illusion – Morgan and Brodie were at least clear on that issue. Needless to say, such a one may, according to Marty, desire "a personal identification with the people."<sup>83</sup> But such history will necessarily compete at crucial points with both the grounds and categories of faith.

In subsequent essays, Hill has elaborated his thesis in such a way that he could distinguish it from certain details in Brodie's accounts. He stresses Joseph's sincerity as well as his superstitious (or mystical and magical) religiosity. Joseph's "religion" was the product of elements common in his culture, his religiosity was the product of his attempt to provide surcease for stresses in his environment. Hill attributes Joseph Smith's story of visits with heavenly messengers and the resulting revelations (including the Book of Mormon) to superstition, sincere confusions, and later embellishments of youthful half-forgotten dreams; it was all a product of mysticism, magic, and myth rather than gross imposture, deception, or charlatanry. That Joseph was both sincere and "religious" in his illusion or delusion seems to constitute Hill's middle ground between genuine prophet and faker or conscious fraud. Shipps has appropriated some of Hill's position on these issues, but she goes further in the direction of a mythological rather than a psychological-environmental explanation. One can, of course, fashion explanations of the Book of Mormon and of Joseph Smith's prophetic claims that render them false without picturing them as instances of conscious deception and fraud and, in that way, work around the "prophet/fraud dialectic,"<sup>84</sup> as Marty calls it. But the prophetic claims are such that they present the believer and unbeliever alike with either a prophet or not-prophet alternative.

Until recently, the standard "gentile" explanation of the beginnings of Mormonism was that Joseph Smith was



a conscious or intentional fraud – his was a “deliberately invented . . . tale,” to use Heschel’s language. Joseph Smith is pictured in the revised standard version as a sincerely religious victim “of an illusion”<sup>85</sup> that was put upon him by his crude magic-saturated, rustic, and deeply superstitious environment. Perhaps he was confused, caught up in the spirit of his age, even dissociative or some combination of possibilities, all of which tend to render the prophetic claims questionable or false through a kind of inadvertence. These new alternative accounts of Joseph Smith (and the Book of Mormon), logically preclude the possibility of the gospel he preached being true. And, as Marty points out, if the first steps do not survive, all that is possible with these new explanations is antiquarian curiosity, not “fateful or faith-full” response.

### **Revisionist History – The Great Leap Forward**

Some are still insisting that the Church must abandon the traditional understanding of the beginnings of the faith.<sup>86</sup> Why is such a revisionist history, as it is now being called, especially by RLDS historians, either desirable or necessary? Presumably, a competent, honest scrutiny of the historical foundations of the faith, that is, a serious look at the beginnings, discloses what Sterling M. McMurrin labels “a good many unsavory things.”<sup>87</sup> McMurrin, for example, charges “that the Church has intentionally distorted its own history by dealing fast and loose with historical data and imposing theological and religious interpretations on those data that are entirely unwarranted.”<sup>88</sup>

For McMurrin, the Mormon “faith is so mixed up with so many commitments to historical events – or to events that are purported to be historical – that a competent study of history can be very disillusioning. Mormonism is a historically oriented religion. To a remarkable degree, the Church has concealed much of its history from its people,



while at the same time causing them to tie their religious faith to its own controlled interpretations of its history." The problem, as McMurrin sees it, is a "fault of the weakness of the faith" which should not be tied at all to history.<sup>89</sup> He strives to separate faith from history, substituting "naturalistic humanism"<sup>90</sup> for prophetic faith – promoting the enterprise of philosophical theology as a substitute for divine special revelations. McMurrin provides the least sentimental statement of the intellectual grounds for a secular revisionist Mormon history, that is, one done entirely in naturalistic terms. McMurrin sees the Mormon past in what Leonard Arrington once called "human or naturalistic terms."<sup>91</sup>

We should, from McMurrin's perspective, begin with the dogma "that you don't get books from angels and translate them by miracles; it is just that simple."<sup>92</sup> A history resting on that premise would require a fundamental reordering of the faith.<sup>93</sup> His program would retain only fragments of a culture resting on abandoned beliefs. Marty, straying from the core of his argument, eventually introduces "many kinds of integrity. Some of these are appropriate to insiders and others to outsiders, some to church authorities and some to historians."<sup>94</sup> But given what Marty had already shown about the necessity of the decisive generative events surviving the acids of modernity, it is difficult to see how he could defend the integrity of a stance such as McMurrin's. Certainly McMurrin's denials do not permit the survival of the crucial historical foundations. But still, Marty defends the history being done by some of those on the fringes of the Church whose arguments are not as coherent as those of McMurrin, yet whose premises are not unlike certain of his dogmas.<sup>95</sup>

### **Faith and the Limits of History: Listening to the Text**

Marty's final approach to doing religious history rests on a rather different understanding of the method and

limits of history<sup>96</sup> than of those historians for whom he offers an apology, or of those who approach Mormon history or the Book of Mormon with naturalistic assumptions. Marty claims a superiority – not merely a distinction – for his approach over that of others. He also claims that his way has been used by some Mormon historians to achieve a “second naiveté,” but without citing any instances. Marty, unlike the others, has no illusions about objectivity or about the desirability of avoiding bias.<sup>97</sup> “People used to say,” according to Marty, “they should be ‘objective,’ but,” he claims, “objectivity seems to be a dream denied.”<sup>98</sup> Ironically, Marvin Hill began his doctoral thesis, which was signed by Marty, with a claim of objectivity or “detachment,” as he called it. Hill also appeals to something called “objective evaluation.”<sup>99</sup> Recently he has passionately defended “the possibility of an objective history” against what he describes as the view “that historians can never escape their own culture and personal biases.”<sup>100</sup> Unfortunately, Hill still seems enthralled by outmoded dogmas about the necessity and possibility of objectivity. Marty describes those historians who “used to say they should be ‘objective,’ but objectivity seems to be a dream denied,”<sup>101</sup> while Hill seems to cling to such a dream, perhaps because it provides for him the only possible way to avoid what he feels would be a destructive relativism and nihilism, if historians were unable to avoid having biases or preferences.<sup>102</sup> But thoughtful scholars now realize that positivism (or historical objectivism) lacks coherence, and that talk about the necessity of avoiding bias, detachment, and neutrality is confused and even illusory precisely because the historian always brings assumptions, biases, and a viewpoint to the task of interpreting texts and providing explanations. Nor does Marty hold, unlike Jan Shipps,<sup>103</sup> that it is possible to discover what really happened in the past, or that historians provide proofs.

Drawing upon some portions of the current literature

on hermeneutics, Marty maintains that all understanding rests on preunderstandings.<sup>104</sup> Historians strive to understand the texts that provide windows to the past from within the formal and informal preunderstandings with which everyone necessarily must approach texts.<sup>105</sup> The older challenges to the historical foundations of faith were "tainted" by ideologies about which some historians remained naive and uncritical. Historians were then, as some of the Saints are now, enthralled by what Marty calls "the biases of a positivism that thought it could be unbiased."<sup>106</sup> Just such a bias fuels the demand for objectivity, neutrality, or detachment from faith that flows from the new secular revisionist Mormon history.<sup>107</sup>

For Marty, history "is not a reproduction of reality," hence "the historian invents."<sup>108</sup> Since historians are necessarily involved in a "social construction of reality," they cannot discover what really happened. Only faint "traces" of the past remain, and from these only more or less plausible social constructions of a past are open to us, and these are accessible only through texts which are themselves colored by understanding. Even plausibility is dependent upon a network of preunderstandings. And every text or complex set of texts remains open to more or less plausible, though competing, interpretations and explanations. Marty's account of method is unlike that of historians currently enthralled by some variety of historical objectivism.

Marty's description of the method, limits, and situated character of the historian has something to contribute to a resolution or clarification of the current debate over Mormon history. Historians may not even be aware of the assumptions upon which they operate, because these form, for them, a natural horizon. Marty has helped to identify certain of the powerful ideologies that control the way in which cultural Mormons do history. He also sets out a version of historical skepticism which seems to make room for the possibility of faith in the face of scientism,

naturalistic humanism, and dogmatic unbelief. A suspension of unbelief is what is needed in order to enter into the categories, norms, and explanations internal to the faith. But the dogmatism of modernity stand in the way of the suspension of unbelief that is necessary for the truth of the faith to shine through when we encounter prophetic messages. Even genuine historical understanding rests on suspension of unbelief, or a willingness to grant the possibility that things are other than what the dogmatism of secular modernity demand.

I agree with Marty that proof is not possible in history, and it is neither possible nor necessary in matters of faith.<sup>109</sup> Still, faith, if it is an "historical faith," is one in which texts witness to divine things.<sup>110</sup> The texts upon which the Mormon faith rests confront us with a message that makes claims upon us, and through listening to it we may come to what Marty calls a testimony of the truth of the message. Marty tells us that we can, if so disposed, hear the message contained in texts; we must then judge whether it will be true for us. He calls this, following Paul Ricoeur, the "hermeneutics . . . of testimony."<sup>111</sup>

How then do we come to believe and then justify our faith? What is it that we believe when faith has as part of its object a complex network of events in the past? We are, of course, shielded from direct access to the past and can only encounter a small segment of it already interpreted for us through texts. The historian, like everyone else, is confronted with the question of whether certain of these texts, for example, the crucial Book of Mormon, witnesses to the truth. An "historical faith," like that of the Saints, comes to be believed by hearing and listening, that is, by our seeking the truth found in the witness contained in the sacred texts. The Book of Mormon makes claims upon us concerning a then and there in which the deity acted, which we must judge by hearing the witness and receiving the testimony of the message for our own here and now.

In that way, a text like the Book of Mormon may serve as the bearer of the memory of divine things which we may begin to appropriate through the interpretative enterprise. Marty struggles toward just such a view of the thoroughly historical faith of Latter-day Saints.

The Book of Mormon, when viewed as a fictional or mythical account, and not as reality, no longer can have authority over us or provide genuine hope for the future. To treat the Book of Mormon as a strange theologically motivated brand of fiction, and in that sense as myth, is to alter radically both the form and content of faith and thereby fashion a new "church" in which the texts are told what they can and cannot mean on the basis of some exterior ideology. To reduce the Book of Mormon to mere myth weakens, if not destroys, the possibility of it witnessing to the truth about divine things. A fictional Book of Mormon fabricated by Joseph Smith, even when his inventiveness, genius, or inspiration is celebrated, does not witness to Jesus Christ but to human folly. A true Book of Mormon is a powerful witness; a fictional one is hardly worth reading and pondering.<sup>112</sup> Still, the claims of the text must be scrutinized and tested, then either believed or not believed without a final historical proof.

An historically grounded faith is vulnerable to the potential ravages of historical inquiry, but it is also one that could be true in a way that would make a profound difference. We are left, by God, with a witness to mighty acts, but we must judge, for we are always at the turning point between two ways. And listening to the text, not proving it true – an impossibility if not a presumption – to discover what its truth is for us, both reveals its truth and makes the sacred past plausible and thereby gives meaning to the life and deepest longings of the believer.

The truth of the prophetic message found in the Book of Mormon is linked to both its claim to be an authentic history and to Joseph Smith's story of how we came to



have the book. To be a Latter-day Saint is to believe, among other things, that the Book of Mormon is true, that there once was a Lehi who made a covenant with God and was led out of Jerusalem and so forth.

Marty feels that to begin to understand the message of a text like the Book of Mormon frees us so that we are somehow "less burdened by concern over the exact reference to literal historical events."<sup>113</sup> He is correct if he means that a deeper and more profound understanding of the Book of Mormon removes obstacles that seekers may confront in grasping its truths, and thereby assists them in trusting its message. In various ways, the Book of Mormon has provided an anchor for the faith of the Saints; it also offers guidance for those anxious and willing to grasp its truths. But when the Book of Mormon is understood as fiction, and in that sense the material for what is sometimes called "the Mormon myth," we have, at best, one more melancholy instance of human folly and, from that perspective, not the word of God. To begin to suppose that it is even possible that the Book of Mormon is true, requires that the text be taken with genuine seriousness in all its various aspects. Therefore, it is a mistake to argue that a mature faith calls for or yields a lessening of concerns about details in the Book of Mormon, which somehow makes the historical and literary elements in that text less crucial, or allows the faithful to abandon the question of whether there was a Lehi colony with whom God made a covenant, with whether Jesus was resurrected or whether angels visited Joseph Smith. Only when faith is an empty routine or reduced to mere sentimentality, and thereby shorn of its deepest substance and meaning, as well as separated from hope, does it no longer matter if the Book of Mormon is an authentic ancient history and its teachings true. What it means for the Mormon faith to have what Marty describes as a "thoroughly historical mode and mold"<sup>114</sup> includes, among other things, that Joseph Smith's



story and the Book of Mormon are known to be a genuine history providing prophetic access to divine things, and not merely entertained in some weak Pickwickian, allegorical, or sentimental sense.

### Notes

1. Martin E. Marty, "Two Integrities: An Address to the Crisis in Mormon Historiography," an address given at the meeting of the Mormon History Association on May 7, 1983, in Omaha, Nebraska, and published in the *Journal of Mormon History* 10 (1983): 3-19; reprinted as "History: The Case of the Mormons, a Special People," in his *Religion and Republic: The American Circumstance* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), 303-25, 377-78. Pages referring to this reprint will appear in brackets following the page numbers for "Two Integrities." He was responding to "On the Question of Faith and History," a paper I read at the Western History Association meetings in October 1981 in San Antonio, Texas.

2. Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith*, 2nd ed. (New York: Knopf, 1971).

3. Fawn M. Brodie, "Fawn McKay Brodie: An Oral Interview," *Dialogue* 14/2 (Summer 1981): 104-5 (a truncated, somewhat modified and garbled version of Shirley E. Stephenson's oral history interview with Brodie called "Biography of Fawn McKay Brodie," California State University, Fullerton, 30 November 1975, taken from 7-10, 22-23 in that text).

4. Nibley's influence among Latter-day Saints has been considerable, but he has not been a favorite of the network of Mormon historians anxious to promote a naturalistic Mormon history. For instances of disagreement with Nibley's method, see Thomas G. Alexander, "Toward the New Mormon History: An Examination of the Literature on the Latter-day Saints in the Far West," in Michael P. Malone, ed., *Historians and the American West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 347-48; Thomas G. Alexander, "The Place of Joseph Smith in the Development of American Religion," *Journal of Mormon History* 5 (1978): 10, n. 9; Marvin S. Hill, "The Historiography of Mormonism," *Church History* 28/4 (1959): 418-19; Marvin S. Hill, "The 'New Mormon History' Reassessed in Light of Recent Books on Joseph Smith and Mormon Origins," *Dialogue* 21/3 (Autumn 1988): 118-19.

5. "Well may we applaud the revisionist historians," according to RLDS Church Historian Richard P. Howard, "for stimulating the document diggers to a new intensity of activity," even though their

undertaking eventually led Mark Hofmann to "actions inimical to the entire historical enterprise. In any case, the revisionist process will continue, for it has a life of its own." Hofmann's forgeries merely "served as catalysts" for revisionist pursuits, but did not initiate such proclivities among Mormon historians. "The process of revisionist history is fully under way. Thanks to [Leonard J.] Arrington and Company, and many others, it has been moving forward for many years" (Richard P. Howard, "Revisionist History and the Document Diggers," *Dialogue* 19/4 [Winter 1986]: 69). But the bulk of post-1950 Mormon history has not been revisionist, for it has either rejected naturalistic explanations, or has not been clearly dependent upon them. But revisionist accounts should not be entirely discounted, for some of them have been influential partly because of the passion with which they are promoted and defended, and they tend to draw inordinate attention.

6. Morgan's contributions to the study of Mormon things were mostly incidental or bibliographical. He worked on a three-volume Mormon history for seventeen years, convincing his admirers that his would be the definitive study; he produced a draft of four chapters, and rough notes for three additional chapters (Dale L. Morgan, *Dale Morgan on Early Mormonism: Correspondence and a New History*, John P. Walker, ed. [Salt Lake City: Signature Press, 1986], 219-319). He also provided extensive assistance to Brodie in the production of her account of Joseph Smith, which he then lavishly praised in an influential review (Dale Morgan, "A Prophet and His Legend," a review of Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, in *Saturday Review*, November 24, 1945, 7-8). Their naturalistic perspective rested upon the assumption that there is no God, hence claims to divine revelation must be explained as instances of conscious fraud, perhaps eventually mixed with elements of delusion or illusion. According to Davis Bitton and Leonard J. Arrington, if Morgan "had completed a history of the Mormon Church, it would have been a work to reckon with. Such was Morgan's ambition. To judge from the draft chapters he did complete, it would not have pleased believing Mormons any more than Fawn Brodie's biography did, for he too placed stress on the evolving nature of Joseph Smith's own self-understanding" (*Mormons and Their Historians* [Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1988], 118). This is an understatement, for Morgan, like Brodie, began with an ideology that denied the possibility of truth in prophetic claims. With that dogma in place, the task was merely to fashion a plausible and coherent naturalistic account. Bitton and Arrington point out that, "as one would expect,"

Morgan's accounts "provide naturalistic explanations for some of the key events in early Mormon history." Inexplicably, they describe Morgan's failure to complete his "ambitious three-volume history of Mormonism" as "one of the tragedies of the present book." They also opine that, with Morgan's "combination of skills and his established reputation for excellence, there was every reason to expect that he would write the great history of the Church for his generation, although even he would have had difficulty satisfying the incompatible demands of rival audiences" (Bitton and Arrington, *Mormons and Their Historians*, 117).

7. Louis Midgley, "Faith and History," in Robert L. Millet, ed., *To Be Learned Is Good If . . .* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1987), 219-20, 223-25.

8. Marty's recognition that there is a current "crisis in Mormon historiography" contrasts with the views of apologists for revisionist Mormon history. For example, Alexander denies that there is such an exigency; "Historiography and the New Mormon History: A Historian's Perspective," *Dialogue* 19/3 (Fall 1986): 25-49, and also "Toward the New Mormon History," 344, 358-361, 368. For fifteen years, since the label was introduced, it was fashionable to designate as "New Mormon History" naturalistic accounts of the Mormon past. During this period, every fashion in Mormon historiography was pictured as unproblematic—a Great Leap Forward. But the apparent tranquility only masked a fervent discussion seething beneath the surface, which has only recently drawn public attention. M. Gerald Bradford ("The Case for the New Mormon History: Thomas G. Alexander and His Critics," *Dialogue* 21/4 [Winter 1988]: 143-44) has called attention to the ferocity of some of the participants in a fine assessment of one layer of the quarrel. The controversies generated by revisionist history, which were fueled by the Hofmann forgeries as they drew public attention in lurid distortions by the press, have reached an intensity that both rivals and parallels earlier quarrels.

9. Marty, "Two Integrities," 3 [304].

10. *Ibid.*, 8 [309].

11. *Ibid.*, 8, 3-4 [309-10, 304-6].

12. *Ibid.*, 3 [303].

13. *Ibid.*, 3 [303-4].

14. *Ibid.*, 8 [309].

15. *Ibid.*, 3 [304].

16. *Ibid.*, 5-8 [306-9].

17. Marty is on the right track when he maintains that historians

cannot "prove that Smith was a prophet" and it is "improbable that they will prove him a fraud." "Similarly, historians cannot prove that the Book of Mormon was translated from golden plates and have not proven that it was simply a fiction of Joseph Smith"; Marty, "Two Integrities," 18, cf. 11, 12 [324, cf. 314].

18. Ibid., 9 [311].

19. Ibid., 10 [312].

20. Ibid., 9 [311].

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid., 11, 12, 18 [314, 315, 324].

23. Martin E. Marty, *A Short History of Christianity* (New York: Meridian, 1959, 1967), 296.

24. Roman Catholics and Protestants are also faced with "the crisis of faith" that marks our age. Continental Protestants, like French Catholics, "have stared into the face of practical and metaphysical atheism and have seen what modernity has done to the meaning of faith itself." Religious controversies in America are mostly internal to the churches simply because "so many of the battles seem to have to do with matters of faith." The reason for this is that such quarrels have "grown up on the sparse soil of modernity"; Martin E. Marty, "Afterword," in Martin E. Marty, ed., *Where the Spirit Leads: American Denominations Today* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1980), 231, 233.

25. Martin E. Marty, *The Public Church: Mainline-Evangelical-Catholic* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), ix; Marty, *A Short History*, 294, 296.

26. Ibid., 296.

27. Ibid., 298-301.

28. Marty, "Two Integrities," 7 [308-9].

29. Ibid., 5 [306].

30. Ibid., 6 [307].

31. Ibid.

32. Ibid.

33. Martin E. Marty, "The Difference in Being a Christian and the Difference It Makes – for History," in C. T. McIntire and Ronald A. Wells, eds., *History and Historical Understanding* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 41-54.

34. Marty, "History: The Case of the Mormons," 303.

35. Marty, "Two Integrities," 6 [307].

36. Marty has served as apologist for the Mormon history done by his students and associates. He signed Marvin S. Hill's "The Role of Christian Primitivism in the Origin and Development of the

Mormon Kingdom, 1830-1845," Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1968. He provided a "Foreword" to a book by Klaus J. Hansen, *Mormonism and the American Experience* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1981), ix-xiv, which he published in the Chicago History of American Religion series. Lawrence Foster refers to him as "major advisor" on a book, *Religion and Sexuality: The Shakers, the Mormons, and the Oneida Community* (Urbana/Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984), vii, originally published with the subtitle *Three American Communal Experiments of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981). Marty provided a blurb for the jacket of Jan Shipps, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Urbana/Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985), and published her essay entitled "The Mormons" in his *Where the Spirit Leads*, 25-40.

37. For example, Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana/Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984).

38. Marty, "Two Integrities," 9, 10-11 [311, 313-14].

39. *Ibid.*, 10 [312].

40. *Ibid.*, 11 [313].

41. *Ibid.*, 9 [311].

42. *Ibid.*, 11 [313].

43. *Ibid.*, 11 [314].

44. *Ibid.*, 12 [315].

45. *Ibid.*, 11 [314].

46. Those interested in Mormon issues often address secondary questions. For the most part, the issues they deal with stand outside the controversy over whether the Book of Mormon is true and Joseph Smith a genuine prophet. Yet opinions on the truth of the foundations may still control, or be reflected in the way they address secondary issues. Lawrence Foster contends that he is inclined "to grapple with Joseph Smith's formative personal experiences." But, "as a scholar in the field of religious history who has read hundreds of similar visionary experiences [presumably entirely comparable to those claimed by Joseph Smith], I tend (unless I find compelling evidence to the contrary) to try to focus on the naturalistic (including psychological) components which accompanied—and which may or may not 'explain'—such phenomena." Foster ("A Radical Misstatement," *Dialogue* 22/2 [Summer 1988]: 5) seems to believe that by approaching Joseph Smith's prophetic claims in naturalistic terms he will succeed in "reconstructing precisely *what* Joseph Smith actually experienced." When applied to the Book of Mormon, he has,



for example, suggested "some of the sources that could contribute to the development of a comprehensive naturalistic explanation of the Book of Mormon—an explanation which could go beyond the conventional Mormon view that it is a literal history translated by Joseph Smith or the conventional anti-Mormon view that it is a conscious fraud" (Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, 294). Though he does not refer to his naturalistic explanation as constituting a "middle ground" between the two alternatives, as he set them forth, that would be an appropriate description. Such explicit naturalistic answers to the primary questions may, in addition, color or even control approaches to secondary questions.

47. Marty, "Two Integrities," 12, also 11, 18 [314, also 324].

48. *Ibid.*, 12 [315].

49. *Ibid.*, 11 [314].

50. *Ibid.*

51. *Ibid.*

52. *Ibid.*, 8 [309].

53. *Ibid.*, 11 [314].

54. *Ibid.*

55. *Ibid.*

56. Efforts to turn Joseph Smith into a mystic may be contrasted with Hugh Nibley, "Prophets and Mystics," in *The World and the Prophets*, vol. 3, *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1987), 98-107, who distinguishes genuine prophets from mystics. Jan Shipps, "Mormons in Politics," Ph.D. diss., University of Colorado, 1965, 31-32, opined that Joseph Smith was a typical mystic and the Book of Mormon a typical mystical text. Her opinion was then promoted by Leonard J. Arrington—see, for example, Leonard J. Arrington and Davis Bitton, *The Mormon Experience: A History of the Latter-day Saints* (New York: Vintage Press, 1979), 5, where Joseph's special revelations are described as mystical theophanies—and taken up by Thomas G. Alexander, "Wilford Woodruff and the Changing Nature of Mormon Religious Experience," *Church History* 45/1 (March 1976): 60-61, 69; cf. Alexander, "The Place of Joseph Smith," 14-15. Paul M. Edwards, "The Secular Smiths," *Journal of Mormon History* 4 (1977): 3-17 (reprinted in Maurice L. Draper and A. Bruce Lindgren, eds., *Restoration Studies II* [Independence, MO: Herald House, 1983], 89-101) turns Joseph Smith into an Eastern mystic. Max Nolan, "Joseph Smith and Mysticism," *Journal of Mormon History* 10 (1983): 105-16, challenged that view. Paul M. Edwards attempts to account for the Book of Mormon as Joseph Smith's "speculative work that gives the story of his



experience," which he understands as mystical. Edwards pictures Joseph Smith as both "mystic and technician. . . . He sought to present his teachings within the bounds of ancient scripture, often reworking the old text to fit his new conceptions. He also gathered his own teaching into the Book of Mormon, a speculative work that gives the story of his experience, and the truths he arrived at from considering the experiences" (*Preface to Faith: A Philosophical Inquiry into RLDS Beliefs* [Midvale, UT: Signature Books, 1984], 31-34, especially 33). Another version of the argument that Joseph Smith was a mystic was advanced in 1983 by Anthony A. Hutchinson, "A Mormon Midrash? LDS Creation Narratives in Redaction-Critical Perspective," a paper presented at the Mormon History Association meetings in Omaha, Nebraska, in May 1983, 10-14, who overtly associated mysticism with fiction-fabrication, myth-production, or parable in Joseph Smith's dissociative personality, in order to explain the book of Moses and Book of Mormon, as well as the story of Moroni. By 1988, he was more cautious with both his claims and his language (Anthony A. Hutchinson, "A Mormon Midrash? LDS Creation Narratives Reconsidered," *Dialogue*, 21/4 [Winter 1988]: 18, n. 5), though he had not entirely abandoned his notion that Joseph Smith was something like a mystic, rather than a prophet as that has been understood by the Saints, and as biblical prophets are understood in much of the critical literature not driven by a narrow theological agenda. Hill, on the other hand, once attempted to link superstition, mysticism, and magic in his naturalistic explanation of Joseph Smith: "Secular or Sectarian History?" *Church History* 43/1 (March 1974): 80, 86, 92; and "Brodie Revisited," *Dialogue* 7/4 (Winter 1972): 75, 76-78.

57. Leonard J. Arrington, "Why I Am a Believer" *Sunstone* 10/1 (1985): 36-38 (an edited version is reprinted in Philip L. Barlow, *A Thoughtful Faith: Essays on Belief by Mormon Scholars* [Centerville, UT: Canon Press, 1986], 225-33); Shipps, *Mormonism*, 46. Klaus J. Hansen, "Jan Shipps and the Mormon Tradition," *Journal of Mormon History* 11 (1984): 138, cf. 144-45, says that Shipps avoids the question of truth with the vague word "myth." In 1984 he maintained that the question of the truth of the Book of Mormon is of decisive importance, though that seems to contradict an earlier opinion. In 1981 (in his *Mormonism*), Hansen essentially took the position now taken by Shipps and also by Lawrence Foster, "New Perspectives on the Mormon Past," *Sunstone* 7/1 (January-February 1982): 41-45.

58. Shipps, *Mormonism*, xii, 6-8, 18, 36, 68. She credits Hill with

fashioning this explanation. Earlier, Dale Morgan and others attempted to link Joseph Smith with magic. The culmination of these efforts is D. Michael Quinn's *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* (Salt Lake City: Signature Press, 1987). Quinn assembles an elaborate, richly documented, fanciful, and highly exaggerated case for seeing Joseph Smith as a magician. Unfortunately, though Quinn proclaims his piety (xx-xxi), he does not show how some of his more bizarre claims about the alleged involvement of Joseph Smith with certain elements of magic can be made consistent with the content of Mormon faith, nor does he attempt to assess the logical implications of his stance for understanding the Book of Mormon or Joseph Smith's prophetic claims. For a wise assessment of the current enthrallment of Mormon historians with the presumed involvement of Joseph Smith with folk magic, see Richard L. Bushman, "The Book of Mormon in Early Mormon History," in Davis Bitton and Maureen U. Beecher, eds., *New Views of Mormon History: A Collection of Essays in Honor of Leonard J. Arrington* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1987), 3-4. Without discounting the magical elements in Joseph's early youth and in the world in which he lived, Bushman sets the whole matter in proper perspective, and thereby allows the prophetic message to have its own integrity apart from the trappings of folk culture.

59. Abraham Heschel, *God in Search of Man* (New York: Meridian and Jewish Publication Society, 1959), 218.

60. *Ibid.*, 223, itemizing letters supplied.

61. Alexander, who had earlier defended all the Mormon history done in the last forty years, now distinguishes between the history written from within the categories of faith and the secular history which explains Mormon things with categories borrowed from secular or sectarian religious studies and the social or behavioral sciences. The essays that show signs of Marty's "crisis in Mormon historiography" are primarily the work of Alexander's "Secularists." The work of most of those he labels "New Mormon Historians" raise few fundamental issues except by inadvertence. Alexander ("Historiography and the New Mormon History," 30, 45-46) now admits that there is a secularized strand of Mormon history that challenges the faith (cf. Bradford, "The Case for the New Mormon History," 143-50, for a searching criticism of Alexander's attack on the critics of naturalistic history). On the other hand, Hill ("The 'New Mormon History' Reassessed," 124-25) denies that a history done in naturalistic terms can challenge the integrity of Mormon faith. He justifies that conclusion by insisting that "mak-

ing concessions where evidence requires merely shifts the way we perceive some things and not the substance of the things themselves" (ibid., 125). He then points to a survey of the readers of *Dialogue*, apparently as an example, indicating that "nearly half" of those few readers who reject the Book of Mormon as an authentic history still claim to "believe in its divine origin" (ibid., 125). He fails to show how such a shift would avoid compromising "the missionary message of the restoration" (ibid., 125) or how it would avoid turning the Book of Mormon into a mere antiquarian curiosity, lacking genuine divine authority, or the power to put the Saints in touch with a real past.

62. Marty, "Two Integrities," 12 [315].

63. Ibid.

64. Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, 294-97; Hansen, *Mormonism and the American Experience*, 10-16; cf. Hansen, "Jan Shipps," 144-45.

65. Marty, "Two Integrities," 13 [316].

66. Shipps, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition*, 39. Shipps claims that "serious critics" of the Book of Mormon have found it "not only worthless but a fraud." However, she insists that they need to explore the implications of its content and religious function for believers. "Without accepting the work at face value," Shipps claims, "it is nevertheless possible to regard the Book of Mormon as the product of an extraordinary and profound act of the religious imagination" (Shipps, "The Mormons," 29-30). Some have seen her move as legerdemain. According to Hansen, "a major reason for her success is her historicist approach, which allows her to dismiss epithets such as fraud or delusion as utterly irrelevant to the kind of questions she asks." He objects to that ploy because it avoids the question of truth. "Significantly, . . . Fawn Brodie, Sterling McMurrin, and the author of this essay . . . believe that if the Book of Mormon wasn't true, it must be a monumental fraud." For Hansen, Brodie demonstrated that the Book of Mormon is fraudulent (Hansen, "Jan Shipps and the Mormon Tradition," 144-45). Thomas G. Alexander ("An Approach to the Mormon Past," a review of Klaus J. Hansen, *Mormonism and the American Experience*, in *Dialogue* 16/4 [Winter 1983]: 146-48) makes Hansen into a defender of the faith. More recently, he has located Hansen and others in a group he labels "Secularists." Though the bulk of his essay is a denial that any Mormon historians have been influenced by positivism, he admits that those he calls "Secularists" make the mistake of "attempting to move it *more* toward positivism" (Alexander, "His-

toriography and the New Mormon History," 31; cf. 39). Alexander ("The Pursuit of Understanding," *Dialogue* 18/1 [Spring 1985]: 110) acknowledges that secular, naturalistic accounts of the Mormon past, that is, history resting on positivist assumptions, are incompatible with faith. He strives to avoid positivism by insisting that he is an historicist. He disregards the threat posed by historicist relativism. He claims that "contrary to what some of the critics of the New Mormon History have asserted, it is possible—perhaps even necessary—for purposes of analysis to separate the question of authenticity from the question of significance. . . . It may even prove useful to address the latter question and ignore the former" (Alexander, "An Approach," 148). He assumes that neutrality on the prophetic truth claims is compatible with accepting the Latter-day Saints on their own terms.

67. Thomas G. Alexander ("Substantial, Important, and Brilliant," a review of Jan Shipps, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition*, in *Dialogue* 18/4 [Winter 1985]: 186) defends Shipps against Hansen's criticisms of her historicist relativism by claiming that those concerned with truth-claims wrongly "engage in sectarian controversy." Troubled by criticisms directed at Shipps, Alexander states that "Hansen, on the left, has joined forces with critics of the 'New Mormon History' on the right" by arguing that the prophetic claims are such that historians cannot entirely avoid or dismiss the question of whether they involve fraud or delusion, or truth. From Alexander's point of view, both modes of criticism "are unfounded, since they erroneously assume the reification of an abstraction and the equivalence of the model and the actual condition," whatever that may mean (Alexander, "Toward the New Mormon History," 368). On the other hand, Hill opposes relativism. He senses that historicist relativism, if taken seriously, threatens to become a form of nihilism, because it denies that explanations have a relationship to a real past. Hence Hill, "Richard L. Bushman—Scholar and Apologist," *Journal of Mormon History* 11 (1984): 133, inveighs against those who "would abandon themselves to a wreckless [*sic*] historical relativity that would logically sacrifice all history as possible truth." Hill does not aim that criticism at Alexander, who has boldly announced his own relativism in an effort to defend himself from the claim that the illusion of an objective history is blemished by positivism, but at critics of revisionist history. Unlike Alexander, Hill insists on the effort to recover the past in "an objective way." He claims that "the historical relativists may have gone too far. If those who doubt the possibility of an objective history had thought their

position through, they would have perceived that if it is not possible to say anything truthful about the past, the missionary message of the restoration would be included. A position so cynical would destroy all Mormon claims to historical truth" (Hill, "The 'New Mormon History' Reassessed," 125). If anyone has begun to move in that direction, it is those anxious to defend themselves from the claim that their history manifests traces of positivism; cf. Alexander, "Historiography and the New Mormon History."

68. Shipps, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition*, 28.

69. *Ibid.*, 29, 43.

70. But the crucial question is whether accounts of human and divine things, and hence myth in that sense, disclose historical reality. Bushman shows that the strength and "staying power of the Latter-day Saints from 1830 to the present rest on belief in the reality" of certain crucial events, including "that the Book of Mormon was true history" (Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, 188). Yet he claims that "Shipps's work breaks the deadlock between believers and skeptics" (*ibid.*, 192). Though their positions have some things in common, in the decisive respect Bushman's position differs from that of Shipps, who holds that what the Saints have is myth (understood as fiction), at least when seen from the perspective of history. That implies that faith is not in touch with a genuine historical reality.

71. Marty, "Two Integrities," 11 [314].

72. When asked about the so-called Salamander Letter (one of Mark Hofmann's sensational forgeries), Shipps said that "the church hierarchy and the Mormon in the street [must] confront the fact that the Mormon story as they believe it is not the way it was." She claimed that, instead of the traditional Mormon account of messengers from the heavens, one of whom made available an authentic ancient text, the roots of Mormon faith actually rest on "magic and occult practices" (Richard Ostling and Christine Arrington, "Challenging Mormonism's Roots," *Time*, May 20, 1985, 44). The disclosure of Hofmann's forgeries has not altered her stance on magic providing the explanation for the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith's prophetic claims. "The future prophet," she asserts, "could very well have been employing the magic arts when he sought treasure in the Hill Cumorah, where he said the plates were found. But since religion and magic were not mutually exclusive . . . , his having been involved in folk magic does not indicate that psychobiographer Fawn M. Brodie was necessarily correct in describing



Joseph Smith as a village scribe who engaged in conscious deception. It is entirely possible that rather than being quite aware that he was creating a work of fiction that he afterward came to accept as true, Smith became convinced as the text of the Book of Mormon started to take shape that the words he dictated constituted the restoration of an ancient history (Jan Shipps, "The Reality of the Restoration and the Restoration Ideal in the Mormon Tradition," in Richard T. Hughes, ed., *The American Quest for the Primitive Church* [Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988], 184).

73. Marty uses Paul Ricoeur's expression "primitive naiveté" to describe the beliefs of the child or isolated tribe or unreflective adult, and uses "secondary naiveté" to describe the faith of one who has faced a crisis of faith by encountering competition to his beliefs and has managed to retain them. Marty makes much of the "primitive naiveté" of the Saints (Marty, "Two Integrities," 5, 9 [306, 312]), or of what he calls "unreflective" Saints (*ibid.*, 10 [312]). The crisis is brought on by threats to naive faith through the recognition of other possibilities. But the Saints have always been involved in controversy over the connection of faith to the Mormon past because their faith is tied to history, and that seems often to have taken them beyond primitive naiveté to reflective understanding.

74. Marty, "Two Integrities," 9 [311].

75. Shipps, "The Mormons in Politics," 31-32.

76. Hill, "Secular or Sectarian History?" 96.

77. *Ibid.*, who is citing Brodie's "Supplement," *No Man Knows My History*, 405-25. Hill does not sense the subtle sophistication of Brodie's position, perhaps because he did not have access to the discussions that took place within the Brodie-Morgan circle. These materials are available in Special Collections at the University of Utah's Marriott Library. Following publication of Bernard DeVoto's review of Brodie's *No Man Knows My History*, "The Case of the Prophet, Joseph Smith," *New York Herald Tribune*, Sunday, December 16, 1945, 7:1, there was a discussion between Morgan, DeVoto, and Brodie over whether it was possible to explain Joseph Smith as other than a conscious fraud, if one began with the assumption or otherwise reached the conclusion that he could not have been a genuine prophet. Morgan held that a Great Divide logically separates the kind of history that can be done by those who believe or bracket their unbelief and those who do not. The problem for those whose *a priori* was that Joseph Smith was not a genuine prophet was to fashion, on that side of the Divide, a coherent and plausible



naturalistic account. Morgan and Brodie realized that there were many scenarios on the unbelieving side of the Great Divide. And, on either side of the Divide, the accounts could be more or less well done. The problem for one attempting to provide a naturalistic account was to figure out a coherent one. Morgan and Brodie argued that, whatever the psychological component of the explanation, the most plausible explanation had to start with and include an element of conscious fraud. For the details of this discussion see \*Dale Morgan to Juanita Brooks, 12 April 1942 (for background); \*Morgan to Brooks, 15 December 1945; \*Morgan to DeVoto, 20 December 1945; \*Morgan to Brodie, 22 December 1945; DeVoto to Brodie, 28 December 1945; (DeVoto to Morgan, 28 December 1945); Brodie to DeVoto, 29 December 1945; \*Morgan to DeVoto, 2 January 1946; \*Morgan to Brodie, 7 January 1946; Morgan to Brodie, 28 January 1946; see Madeline McQuown's notes on the discussion between DeVoto, Morgan, and Brodie, no date, for a summary—these are all available in the Marriott Library Special Collections. Letters marked with an asterisk are in Morgan, *Dale Morgan*, 25-29, 84-119.

78. Brodie, "An Oral Interview," 103-5, 111.

79. Hill, "Historiography of Mormonism," 418-19.

80. Alexander Campbell, *Delusions: An Analysis of the Book of Mormon* (Boston: Benjamin H. Greene, 1832).

81. Hill, "Secular or Sectarian History?" 96. Hill now claims that in 1974 (*ibid.*, 96) he "used the term 'middle ground' to describe a position between those who said Mormonism is untrue and those who insisted on conclusive proof that it is true" (Hill, "The 'New Mormon History' Reassessed," 116, n. 1). That is not an accurate paraphrase of the formula advanced in "Secular or Sectarian History?" Nowhere in that essay does he search for a middle ground between a conservative "right" among Mormon historians insisting on conclusive proof of Joseph Smith's prophetic claims, and an anti-Mormon "left" which claims "that Mormonism is historically untrue" (*ibid.*, 115). The mode of explanation that he called for in 1974 was clearly somewhere between prophet and faker. What he now proffers as a "middle ground" is an agnosticism about the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith's prophetic claims. Hill's "middle ground historians" do not try to *prove* either that Joseph Smith was a prophet or a fraud (*ibid.*, 117). From his perspective, all attempts to test or examine the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon are misguided, for the question of the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon (1) is not one that can be examined by professional

historians, and (2) such questions are irrelevant to the truth of the faith, for what might make a religion "true" is merely its "essential social usefulness" (ibid.). After incorrectly charging Noel Reynolds with holding that a final proof of the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon is a simple matter, Hill wonders "after 150 years of arguments whether it is that easy to finally establish the historicity of the Book of Mormon, or to disprove it" (ibid., 116, cf. a similar remark in Hill, "Brodie Revisited," 72). By denying that the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon can be tested, Hill skirts the question of whether Joseph Smith's prophetic claims and the Book of Mormon are within the arena of history in such a way that they can be addressed by historians, even if the issue of veracity cannot be settled in that manner. To treat the Mormon faith as anything but firmly rooted in history is to rob it of its essential character, and thereby transform the faith (Midgley, "Faith and History," 220-25). Hill seems to realize that this is true, for he asserts that one of his critics, contrary to what he has written, denies that anything can be said about the past. Hill reasons that to adopt such a relativist position would rob the faith of something essential, which he apparently is not willing to do (Hill, "The 'New Mormon History' Reassessed," 125). Yet, he attacks efforts to test the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon (ibid., 116, 118-121, where his targets are Nibley, Bushman, Reynolds, John W. Welch, and Truman G. Madsen; cf. "The Historiography of Mormonism," 418, where Hill takes on Nibley).

82. See Marvin S. Hill, "Critical Examination of *No Man Knows My History*, by Fawn M. Brodie," copy of a manuscript in Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, n.p., n.d., 17. The acceptance of "a deterministic, environmental interpretation of Joseph's history" he called "a naturalistic interpretation of Joseph Smith." This bias can be seen in Hill's recent essay (Hill, "Richard L. Bushman," 126) where he struggles to save "environmentalism," as he now calls his naturalistic *a priori*, from Bushman's account which separates the core of the message of the restored gospel from narrow environmental causation, or from simplistic product-of-culture explanations.

83. Marty, "Two Integrities," 11 [314].

84. Ibid.

85. Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, 218.

86. John Farrell, "The Historian's Dilemma, in "Utah: Inside the Church/State," *Denver Post*, November 21-28, 1982, Special Report, 45; Ostling and Arrington, "Challenging Mormonism's Roots," 44.

87. Sterling M. McMurrin, "An Interview with Sterling McMurrin," *Dialogue* 17/1 (Spring 1984): 23 (a version was also published under the title, "The History of Mormonism and Church Authorities: An Interview with Sterling M. McMurrin," in *Free Inquiry* 4/1 [Winter 1983/84]: 32-34).

88. *Ibid.*, 22.

89. *Ibid.*, 20.

90. Sterling M. McMurrin, *Religion, Reason, and Truth* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1982), 279-80, cf. 166-67.

91. Leonard J. Arrington, "Scholarly Studies of Mormonism in the Twentieth Century," *Dialogue* 1/1 (Spring 1966): 28. For additional apologies for naturalistic explanations, see the preface to Leonard J. Arrington's *Great Basin Kingdom* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), viii-ix; Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, 294; Sterling M. McMurrin, "A New Climate of Liberation: A Tribute to Fawn McKay Brodie," *Dialogue* 14/1 (Spring 1981): 74; Alexander, "An Approach to the Mormon Past," 146; Marvin S. Hill, "A Note on Joseph Smith's First Vision and Its Import in the Shaping of Early Mormonism," *Dialogue* 12/1 (Spring 1979): 90, 95, 97; and also Hill, "The 'New Mormon History' Reassessed," 115, where he quotes Arrington with approval (see Arrington, "Scholarly Studies of Mormonism," 28) that "Mormon history and culture can be studied in human or naturalistic terms—indeed, must be so studied." Hill does not attribute that statement to Arrington, but, like Alexander ("Historiography and the New Mormon History," 25), he mistakenly attributes it to Moses Rischin, a non-Mormon historian, who in a brief and obscure essay on recent literature on Mormon history, wrote the following: "*Leonard Arrington wrote: 'Most of those who have promoted both the [Mormon History] Association and Dialogue are practicing Latter-day Saints; they share basic agreement that the Mormon religion and its history are subject to discussion, if not to argument, and that any particular feature of Mormon life is fair game for detached examination and clarification. They believe that the details of Mormon history and culture can be studied in human and naturalistic terms—indeed, must be so studied—and thus without rejecting the divinity of the Church's origin and work'*" (Moses Rischin, "The New Mormon History," *American West* 6/2 [March 1969], 49, quoting Arrington's "Scholarly Studies of Mormonism," 28). In their recent survey of Mormon historians, Arrington and Bitton call special attention to the naturalistic explanations or assumptions of Morgan, Brodie, and Bernard DeVoto (*Mormons and Their Historians*, 117, 119, 123). They also stress that Arrington "did

not hesitate to give a naturalistic interpretation to certain historical themes sacred to the memories of Latter-day Saints" (ibid., 131-132), as they quote the passage from the preface to *Great Basin Kingdom*, vii-viii, in which Arrington defends his use of naturalistic explanations of divine revelations. Hill recently has quoted, but not entirely accurately and yet with approval, Arrington's original apology for his use of naturalistic explanations of the causes of revelation (Hill, "The 'New Mormon History' Reassessed," 117). Robert B. Flanders, with roots in the RLDS community, in 1974 fastened the label "New Mormon History" on middle-ground revisionist accounts of the Mormon past ("Some Reflections on the New Mormon History," *Dialogue* 9/1 [Spring 1974]: 34-41). "Thirty years ago," according to Flanders, "Leonard Arrington in *Great Basin Kingdom* raised for Mormons a fundamental question of epistemology: can empiricism, the secular method of modern history, stand with or even shoulder aside prophetic insight as a means of describing and understanding the saints' experience with the Kingdom in time and space? The challenge of the question," Flanders claims, "continues its work" (Robert B. Flanders, Review of *New Views of Mormon History: A Collection of Essays in Honor of Leonard J. Arrington*, Davis Bitton and Maureen U. Beecher, eds., *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 8 [1988]: 91). Unlike RLDS historians, the LDS historians who have taken up the effort to provide naturalistic accounts "are revisionist primarily in the extent to which they rely on the critical methods of secular historical analysis. But it is a revisionism both gentle and veiled. Generally, they leave church politics and leadership alone, as subjects that are inappropriate, taboo, or likely to prove counterproductive. Products of a subculture that questions leadership but little, perhaps they simply never learn to do it," quite unlike their more radically revisionist counterparts among the RLDS (Flanders, Review of *New Views*, 93).

92. McMurrin, "An Interview," 25.

93. Such a history would dispense, except for sentimental purposes, with the traditional belief that Joseph Smith had access to divine things through special revelations. A seemingly less radical approach would be to begin to treat the historical portions of the foundational texts and events as instances of myth or fiction and not as historical reality. For example, Arrington is prepared to accept Joseph Smith's visions or the Book of Mormon as symbolic, or metaphorical, or mythical, or as actual events (Arrington, "Why I Am a Believer," 37). From his perspective, it does not seem to matter how one understands them. He explains that the religious "truth" he

finds in those accounts is on the same order as one might find in something like Pearl Buck's *The Good Earth*. This may explain John Farrell's having reported that "during the Arrington years, the historians tried to gently nudge the church away from its insistence on literal interpretation" (Farrell, "The Historian's Dilemma, 45). Arrington came to the study of Mormon things already equipped with the notion of "myth" which he learned from reading George Santayana, which allowed him to understand the sacred texts and founding events as myths or symbols, if they were not genuine historical realities. From his point of view, it does not matter whether messengers from heaven visited with Joseph Smith or whether the resurrected Jesus visited Nephites because Santayana held that even fiction could contain "religious truth" (see Arrington, "Why I Am a Believer," 36-37). "Liberal Latter-day Saints," according to Farrell, "would find it easier to stick with their church if only it would treat The Book of Mormon as an allegorical story that teaches righteous behavior but isn't necessarily historic truth—the way the Christian churches treat" the Bible (Farrell, "The Historians Dilemma," 42). Farrell also commented that "it would be easier if the church were willing to treat . . . the Book of Mormon and the Book of Abraham as parables, but the hierarchy won't back down" (ibid., 45).

94. Marty, "Two Integrities," 19, cf. 10 [324, cf. 312].

95. What meaning and authority might the Book of Mormon have, when read as "the casting of theology in story form" (Hutchinson, "A Mormon Midrash? LDS Creation Narratives Reconsidered," 16), or as "*inspired fiction*" (ibid., 15)? He insists that "such a sensitive and crucial subject is too complex and broad to be addressed" in a sixty-four page essay setting forth a revisionist ideology. And yet he affirms that stories, when understood as mere myths, have "in some ways gained a new power because of their newly acquired clarity of meaning," though he also grants that he "suffered a sense of loss," and "experienced a certain disappointment" as he rejected "the claim of many of Joseph Smith's works that they not only have a divine origin but also have an ancient origin" (ibid., 70). He now advances the notion that "imaginative appropriation" (ibid., 12), "imaginative reworking" (ibid., 14), or "creative reworking" of older beliefs, stories or traditions by "inspired" redactors constitutes divine revelation. The product of "imagination" (ibid., 15, 16, 17, 17, n. 3) is "myth," understood as "the casting of theology in story form" (ibid., 16). And yet "one may freely agree that a myth's power in part depends upon the historical reality of events or persons within it" (ibid., 17, n. 3),



perhaps as a result of what he demurely labels “vigorous criticism” (ibid., 11). But historical reality must stand behind the myth “only when this historical reality is somehow directly related to the reality the myth seeks to mediate” (ibid., 17, n. 3; cf. Midgley, “Faith and History,” 221-22). When might that be? “The power of a myth about redemption through Christ crucified and resurrected, however, seems directly dependent on whether Jesus in fact died and then bodily reappeared to his disciples” (Hutchinson, “A Mormon Midrash? LDS Creation Narratives Reconsidered,” 17, n. 3), but the power of the restored gospel is not dependent upon whether angels visited with Joseph Smith, or whether certain of Joseph Smith’s works have a genuine ancient origin. The Book of Mormon, book of Abraham, and book of Moses (including the Enoch materials) are, for him, merely “myths” generated by Joseph Smith’s “creative reworking” of biblical and other lore. Those in thrall to naturalistic accounts of the Book of Mormon (and hence of the Mormon past) turn to what McMurrin once denigrated as “sophisticated theories of symbol and myth” (McMurrin, *Religion, Reason, and Truth*, 143), borrowed from Protestant or Catholic theologians or similar sources in an effort to turn prophets into mystics in order to salvage some semblance of “religious” meaning from stories no longer believed to be simply true. The difference between a Hutchinson and a McMurrin is the degree of sentimentality about elements of the faith whose grounds have been rejected or abandoned.

96. Marty, “Two Integrities,” 4-5 [305].

97. Cf. Hill, “Richard L. Bushman,” 125-33. Hill seemed troubled by the ease with which Bushman was able to tell Joseph Smith’s story and defend the Book of Mormon against traditional criticism. He faulted Bushman’s book because he saw it as an apology, and, from his perspective, faith necessarily introduces a corrupting bias. Hill has also faulted Richard L. Anderson for manifesting a “pro-Mormon bias of such intensity that it leads too often to overstatement, errors in logic, and misreading of evidence” (Marvin S. Hill, Review of Richard L. Anderson, *Joseph Smith’s New England Heritage*, in *The New England Quarterly* 46/1 [March 1973]: 156.) Hill (review of Leonard J. Arrington and Davis Bitton’s *The Mormon Experience*, in *American Historical Review* 84/5 [December 1979]: 1487-88) complains that the authors of that book have a “booster spirit” or an “affirmative bias” that causes them to overlook or distort things. They “demonstrate a strong Mormon bias that leads to errors that may not be observed except by specialists.” He claims, by way of illustration, that they fail to mention that two of



the three witnesses to the Book of Mormon later denied their testimony, and they are guilty of "ignoring the romantic disposition" of the plot and characters of the Book of Mormon. Hill's polemic against Bushman's book also reflects a demand among certain historians, who long for the appearance of neutrality and dispassionate objectivity, for detachment from belief in the doing of Mormon history. By clinging to the myth that the historian can and must be detached from the corrupting bias of faith, Mormon historians may or may not sense that the naturalistic bias standing behind environmental explanations betrays the faith.

98. Marty, "Two Integrities," 4 [305]. "Subservience to a particular religion is therefore incompatible with honest inquiry, whether by historians or by anyone else" (James L. Clayton, "Does History Undermine Faith?" *Sunstone* 7/2 [March-April 1982]: 34).

99. Hill, "Secular or Sectarian History?" 80, 88, 89.

100. Hill, "The 'New Mormon History' Reassessed," 125.

101. Marty, "Two Integrities," 4 [305]; cf. Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

102. Hill, "The 'New Mormon History' Reassessed," 125.

103. Shippo, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition*, 28.

104. Marty, "Two Integrities," 14 [318]. Revisionist historians tend to be uncomfortable with this literature. The following is an example: "Most of the recent interest in the study of hermeneutics," according to Hutchinson, "influenced by New Criticism, the philosophical hermeneutics of the late [Martin] Heidegger [sic], and French Structuralism, has centered in noematics [thoughts about texts and their meaning] and the question of intent" (Anthony A. Hutchinson, "LDS Approaches to the Holy Bible," *Dialogue* 15/1 [Spring 1982]: 119, n. 9). "Although the recent discussion is needed and somewhat helpful, I think," Hutchinson opines, "that some basic cautions are needed," though he has not indicated what they might be. He has been influenced by the discussion of hermeneutical issues, for he grants that a presuppositionless exegesis of texts is impossible (*ibid.*, 118, n. 8). His misgivings about philosophical hermeneutics may betray an uneasiness about a discussion of the implications of the assumptions upon which his own ideology rests.

105. Marty turns to the current literature on hermeneutics (Marty "Two Integrities," 6, 14-18 [307, 317-24]). Martin Heidegger has shown, according to Marty, "that unprejudiced, objective knowl-

edge was not possible" by identifying the formal and informal preunderstandings that stand behind all interpretations and explanations. Marty assumes that what he calls hermeneutics is a special approach to texts. It is actually the attempt to understand the conditions necessary for understanding any text or text analogue. Hermeneutics is an endeavor to clarify historical method and is not a special technique that can be set over against other techniques. Marty also seems to neglect the function of tradition in making the meaning of texts accessible.

106. Marty, "Two Integrities," 6 [307].

107. Though the bulk of his essay is an effort to show that no one doing so-called "New Mormon History" has been influenced by positivism, Alexander now admits that "the term 'objectivity' has become so weighted with the positivistic connotation of full detachment . . . that it should be abandoned." Furthermore, he admits, "it is clear that some historians, including some of the New Mormon Historians—in the search for objectivity—have tried to detach their personal religious and moral views from their writing" ("Historiography and the New Mormon History," 39). He cites Hill and Melvin T. Smith as examples, but the list could be extended to include others like Michael T. Walton and George D. Smith. The pressure on Mormon historians to leave their own belief out of their history comes at least partly from those who simply do not believe. Both the demand for objectivity in the sense of detachment from faith, and for naturalistic treatments of Mormon history originally came from unbelievers who thought they had somehow avoided the corrupting commitments of those they brushed aside as mere apologists. Morgan and Brodie, both writers with roots in Mormon culture, were flush with that illusion. But both Morgan's work, as well as the recent seemingly more neutral or detached history done by people like Hill and Hansen, suffer in comparison with that done by those who are believers, and who are not embarrassed to have their faith, rather than an absence of faith, play a role in their history. The strength of Morgan's position is that he correctly sensed that it had to be one way or the other—that there is a Great Divide necessarily separating those who write history with naturalistic assumptions from those who allow the possibility that the prophetic claims could be simply true. When Bushman's *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* is compared with Morgan's efforts—both cover somewhat the same ground—it turns out that Bushman's work is clearly superior in content, style, and plausibility, yet it does not manifest the affectation of seeming detachment or neutrality that

leaves the reader guessing about the controlling biases. Those signals are often placed in the text by writers anxious to make their writing acceptable to what Bitton and Arrington call the *demands* of different audiences.

108. Marty, "Two Integrities," 5 [305].

109. *Ibid.*, 15 [319-20].

110. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, 187. The crux of Hill's quarrel with Bushman concerns the Book of Mormon. Hill claims "that Bushman says nothing about the theology of the Book of Mormon" (Hill, "Richard L. Bushman" 127, 129-30), and that "Bushman's conservatism is also manifest in his failure to treat Book of Mormon themes, except to argue that Book of Mormon theocratic tendencies hardly match Republican values in 1820 America" (Hill, "The 'New Mormon History' Reassessed," 120, citing Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, 132-33). Though Bushman provided a rather full account of its prophetic message (see chap. 4, 115-42, which is entitled "The Book of Mormon," and also Bushman's fine essay entitled "The Book of Mormon in Early Mormon History," 3-18, which Hill overlooks), he did not, as Hill seems to prefer, opine that the Book of Mormon contains a pessimistic Calvinism which Joseph Smith later contradicted and replaced with an optimistic, progressive (or liberal) view of man, and a correspondingly different view of God. Alexander maintains that it is "bad history" to hold that even the central prophetic messages of the restoration – the understanding of God and man – unfold in a coherent manner or "build on each other in a hierarchical fashion." To hold such a view, he feels, "leaves an unwarranted impression of continuity and consistency." Instead, he sees in the teachings of Joseph Smith and others after 1835 a radical shift away from a form of Calvinism (or "basically sensual and devilish man"), as well as an "essentially trinitarian" understanding of God similar to that found in nineteenth-century American Protestantism. He seems anxious that the current interest in the message of the Book of Mormon will replace what he (and others) see as a later optimistic, "progressive theology," which he thinks came on the scene in what he calls the "progressive reconstruction of doctrine" between 1893 and 1925 (Alexander, "The Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine: From Joseph Smith to Progressive Theology," *Sunstone* 5/4 [July-August 1980]: 24-33; reprinted in *Sunstone* 10/5 [May 1985]: 8-18). Though he denies that the revelations to Joseph Smith constitute a coherent line-upon-line adding to the Mormon understanding of divine things, Alexander still feels that "the Book of Mormon is an

ancient text and that the doctrines explicated in the book are doctrines believed by the Nephites and other ancient peoples whose record the book contains" (Alexander, "Afterwords," *BYU Studies* 29/4 [1989]: 143). That avowal may make his theory of a radical "reconstruction" of the early and presumably pessimistic views on man and God to a later optimistic, "progressive theology" somewhat less attractive to revisionist historians. He is anxious to defend "progressive theology" against the presumably pessimistic Calvinist orthodoxy, moderated with touches of Arminianism, to which he finds parallels in the Book of Mormon and other early revelations. This appears to be an argument against what he and others (for example, McMurrin and O. Kendall White, Jr., *Mormon New-Orthodoxy: A Crisis Theology* [Salt Lake City: Signature Press, 1987]) have labelled "Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy," which they fault for taking the contents of the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith's prophetic claims seriously. Alexander claims that even the understanding of "the atonement and salvation," which he concludes was originally "similar" to the teaching "that might have been found in many contemporary Protestant denominations," underwent a "transformation" or "reconstruction" in the "doctrinal development" of the Nauvoo period (Thomas G. Alexander, "'A New and Everlasting Covenant': An Approach to the Theology of Joseph Smith," in Davis Bitton and Maureen U. Beecher, eds., *New Views of Mormon History: A Collection of Essays in Honor of Leonard J. Arrington* [Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1987], 57-58). The King Follett funeral sermon is, for Alexander, the culmination of a radical transformation in "Joseph Smith's theology" ("Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine," 28; "A New and Everlasting Covenant," 58-59). Hill assumes that "Alexander has demonstrated the negative, Calvinistic view of man in early Mormonism" (Hill, "Richard L. Bushman," 127), and he conjectures that Bushman skirted those troubling conclusions in his treatment of the Book of Mormon. Hill's paraphrase of Alexander's inference, however, is flawed, for Alexander actually maintains that "the Mormon doctrine of man in New York contained elements of both Calvinism and Arminianism, though tending toward the latter" ("Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine," 25). Alexander's language is ambiguous. For example, a number of his inferences can be read as holding that Joseph Smith drew upon strands of Protestant sectarian theology in fashioning the Book of Mormon and early revelations, a position that Alexander would want to deny. But this leaves unclear the meaning of his claims that the Book of Mormon and early teachings of Joseph Smith are "close" or "similar" to

contemporary orthodox Protestant theology. In one place he argues that "biblical interpretation is dependent upon a theological system. . . . The system of interpretation which Mormons adopted in 1830 was drawn from contemporary Protestantism" ("The Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine," 18, n. 23). These statements seem to entail that the system of theology entertained by Mormons in 1830 was drawn from contemporary Protestantism. But Alexander is very anxious to eschew such an inference. Unfortunately he has remained silent on the crucial issues, as he has maintained that "Mormon theology" underwent a "transformation" or "reconstruction" after 1835, as it became more "optimistic," and "progressive," or what others (McMurrin, White) call "liberal." The evolutionary explanation of Mormon beliefs raises fundamental questions about both the character of revelation and the position of the Book of Mormon. Other than Alexander, the tendency of those who argue that there has been a radical "reconstruction" of "Mormon theology" is to hold that the Book of Mormon has no authentic ties to the ancient world, and is, therefore, simply Joseph Smith's fiction, inspired or otherwise. Alexander has yet to explain how one can both believe that the Book of Mormon is an authentic ancient text and yet contain teachings remarkably similar to contemporary Protestantism or whether such apparent similarities are significant. Others, for example, McMurrin, Hutchinson, and perhaps Ostler, have tried to fashion more explicit and coherent revisionist explanations of the Book of Mormon, but have jettisoned, either in whole or in part, historical components of the text, as well as the account of its coming forth through the agency of an angel.

111. Marty, "Two Integrities," 15 [319]. This portion of Marty's essay (Marty, "Two Integrities," 14-18 [317-24]) is mired in a terminology he borrows from the literature on hermeneutics where he is not particularly at home. But it is also the best part of his essay because he has gotten to the crux of the issues and has separated himself from both the relativistic historicism and historical objectivism of writers like Shipps and Foster.

112. Hutchinson argues that the Book of Mormon is "nineteenth-century fiction," but it is still somehow "inspired" (Anthony A. Hutchinson, "The Word of God Is Enough: The Book of Mormon as Nineteenth-Century Fiction," transcript of a talk delivered at the 1987 Washington Sunstone Symposium, May 15-16, 1987, 1, 7-9.) He insists that it is now necessary for specially enlightened Saints to see that the Book of Mormon is not genuine history in order, among other things, to avoid idolatry (*ibid.*, 7-8), as well as to begin



to conform to the standards of secular fundamentalism that he thinks constitutes the standard of scholarship. His primary target is Hugh Nibley (*ibid.*, 3-4). But he is also critical of Blake Ostler's view (*ibid.*, 5) that, while there may be some reasons for believing that the historical portions of the Book of Mormon are authentic, the teachings found in that text were inventions by Joseph Smith (Blake Ostler, "The Book of Mormon as a Modern Expansion of an Ancient Text," *Dialogue* 10/1 [Spring 1987]: 66, 76-87, 108-15). In order to make his theory of "expansions" palatable, Ostler claims that the absorption and adaptation of dogmas from the sectarian environment by Joseph Smith must now be understood as constituting a kind of "inspiration." Hutchinson correctly senses that one must flatly reject the understanding of revelation contained in the Book of Mormon—an understanding directly linked to "its claims about itself" (Hutchinson, "The Word of God Is Enough," 6), and hence to its claim to be an authentic historical record—in order to put in place the kind of theology which he has in mind and which he has borrowed from Catholic and Protestant theologians. Less thoughtful and less strident versions of the position advanced by Hutchinson are occasionally offered, sometimes where the need to see texts like the Book of Mormon as merely inspired fiction is made to grow out of assessments of the findings of critical historical studies on the Bible. Ostler is less coherent than Hutchinson and hence seemingly less radical. However, he also senses that his "expansion" theory demands fundamental alterations in the understanding of what constitutes divine revelation. He advances what he labels "A Mormon Model of Revelation" (Ostler, "The Book of Mormon as a Modern Expansion," 109-11). His novel theory of revelation feeds his "expansion" theory. And he grants that "some may see [his] expansion theory as compromising the historicity of the Book of Mormon. To a certain extent it does" (*ibid.*, 114). Hutchinson, at this point, complains that Ostler has failed to see that, once one has compromised any of those claims (Hutchinson, "The Word of God Is Enough," 5-7), *all* of the claims made by the Book of Mormon about itself must be rejected. Hutchinson, unlike Ostler, capitulates entirely to secular fundamentalism to avoid what both consider the sectarian fundamentalism inherent in the Latter-day Saint understanding of the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith's prophetic claims. Quinn seems to have incorporated some version of the Hutchinson-Ostler type of approach to the Book of Mormon (*Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 150, where he cites Ostler, "The Book of Mormon as a Modern Expansion," 66-67, 100, 104-



15), but without attempting to show how that position can be reconciled with an acceptance of the Book of Mormon as an authentic ancient text and Joseph Smith as a genuine prophet.

113. Marty, "Two Integrities," 17 [321].

114. *Ibid.*, 3 [304].