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## Part Two: The Logical Structure of the Authorship Debate

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## PART TWO



### THE LOGICAL STRUCTURE OF THE AUTHORSHIP DEBATE

**L**ogicians understand that it is impossible to prove any historical claim true absolutely. The evidence we have from the past is extremely limited: we cannot talk to dead people to check on details or alternative observations; accounts preserved in diaries and newspapers are biased and reflect the perspectives and agendas of their authors; all records are selective in what they report; and because we read all these evidences from the perspective of our own times, we may be blind to dimensions of situations that were obvious to contemporaries. The greatest challenge historians face is the accurate reconstruction of ways of thinking in other times and places. Interpreting evidence requires scholars to make assumptions that may determine and will certainly limit the range of possible conclusions.

One important issue that all interpreters of Joseph Smith must face, but many never acknowledge, is the issue of supernatural explanations of the origin of the Book of Mormon. An important rule of modern science that has made it possible for people from all different religious and

nonreligious perspectives to work in the same scientific fields is the principle of naturalism. Though it is called a principle, it functions as a methodological rule. Scientists agree that they will not invoke supernatural entities or realities in explaining the phenomena under consideration. This rule, which prevents physicists from explaining frost patterns on winter windows in terms of a being like Jack Frost, also prevents historians, who are committed to scientific methods, from adducing the actions of gods and angels to explain human events, including the publication of books. Clearly, this poses a problem for professional historians dealing with Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon.

Interpreted as a methodological rule, the principle of naturalism says nothing about the actual existence or activities of gods, angels, or other supernatural entities. It only limits scientific consideration to observable (natural) phenomena. Unfortunately, many scientists—historians included—fail to realize that the scientific method puts aside claims of religious truth not because such claims cannot be true, but because science is unable to deal with such questions. They confuse this methodological rule with a metaphysical truth. For less sophisticated scientists, the principle of naturalism means there are no gods, angels, or other supernatural entities. For them, explanations of events in terms of such supernatural entities not only violate rules of scientific discourse, they are simply mistaken.

A plainer way to say all this is that many scientists and nonscientists begin with the assumption that all explanations that incorporate supernatural entities are simply and irredeemably false. In other words, when they hear a story like Joseph Smith's, in which an angel plays a central and essential role, they assume that it has to be false, at least in its reference to an angel. This is what Sterling McMurrin meant when he told a newspaper reporter that he knew the

Joseph Smith account of the Book of Mormon was false the first time he heard it as a boy. He already “knew” at that tender age that because there were no such things as angels, Joseph Smith’s story of an angel had to be false.<sup>1</sup> The point of all this is to help us realize that when someone rejects the Joseph Smith story and gives reasons for doing so, it is important to determine first whether that person would accept Joseph’s account if it were supported by any conceivable evidence. If that person is making a priori assumptions that exclude any and all supernatural explanations without consideration, those assumptions should be the focus of the debate rather than the evidence for Joseph’s account.

There is no point in discussing the evidence or arguments for or against the Joseph Smith account unless the discussants at least accept the possibility of its truth. When that possibility is accepted in principle, then reasonable discussion can focus on the merits of the evidence. Believers in God can be just as critical of evidence and explanatory logic as anyone else. They need differ only in that their minds are open to a wider range of possible explanations.

Because a theory can never be proven true, science tests alternative theories and rejects those that produce false predictions. The same logic works for explanations of historical phenomena. While no explanation of any phenomenon can be proven true, historians can accomplish a great deal by sorting out the more or less plausible explanations, and refuting others with evidence. Because some evidence is stronger than other evidence, scholars prefer explanations that are not only consistent with the best evidence, but also leave the fewest puzzles unsolved.

What does all this have to do with the authorship of the Book of Mormon? The Book of Mormon was published on a normal press in 1830. For every book published, there must be an author—someone who wrote it. Someone had to put

the words together in the order in which the printer set them into type. This is usually a simple matter. Most books tell us who the author is, or at least give a pseudonym that we know provides the author some desired anonymity. But Joseph Smith and all the witnesses of the process by which the words of the Book of Mormon were strung together on paper agreed that he was not the true author. He was only dictating words given to him through some divinely controlled medium.

But this is not that big a problem. If the book had been like others of its time, it might have been impossible to test Joseph's story. But this was not typical: it claimed to have been written by more than two dozen different authors over a thousand-year period starting almost twenty-five hundred years earlier, and it further claimed that its first authors were Hebrews of the seventh century B.C. who traveled by a fairly well-defined route from the Middle East to the Western Hemisphere, where they settled and built cities. The book describes geographical features of their lands and cultural features of their population in great detail. It describes their language and beliefs. In short, if Joseph Smith were the author, he stuck his neck out a mile, for among scholars, the techniques for exposing fraudulent historical writings are well developed and confidently employed, and the more details a fraudulent writing contains, the more likely it is that these techniques will uncover the fraud. No well-informed historian would believe for a minute that Joseph Smith could forge a 590-page book and successfully attribute it to ancient authors. Even the cleverest deception would be quickly uncovered, and as knowledge of the past increases over time, his fraud would be exposed again and again for failing to anticipate these new discoveries. While a book might conceivably be made to look authentic by matching the standard knowledge at the

time of its production, it would gradually become less persuasive as more and more is learned about the times it claims to describe. On the other hand, truly authentic ancient documents would continue to look ancient, even in light of new discoveries and new expectations. Authentic features not previously recognized would be found as scholars gain greater understanding of history and culture.

Most treatments of the Book of Mormon by secular scholars have simply assumed the book was written in the nineteenth century, showing features of the book that might make sense from that perspective without considering any of the standard techniques for detecting forgeries of ancient books. It has been the defenders of the Book of Mormon who have been most vigorous in examining the text for evidences of antiquity, and their findings are mounting higher and higher in the affirmative. While attempts to identify elements of the Book of Mormon that might derive from the nineteenth-century cultural context are usually ambiguous matters of interpretation, attempts to discover the authenticity of the book have identified dozens of clear textual features that distinguish it from nineteenth-century writing—features that are found only in ancient texts.

The most general way to state the central issue in the authorship debate is to ask whether the book is ancient or modern in origin. If it is modern, Joseph Smith's account cannot be true. If it is ancient, no explanation makes more sense than the one he gave. The skeptics have developed a basic repertoire of alternative theories to explain the book and the known facts. These theories are not compatible with one another, so one cannot take the position that with so many options, they must add up to something like the true position. Rejecting the first-person accounts of Joseph and the other witnesses requires an honest person to set forth an alternative explanation for the book, but none of the

alternative theories that have been advanced is free of major flaws or objections. As these flaws become more widely understood and as the evidence of the book's ancient character continues to mount, it becomes less and less reasonable to maintain that the book is a modern invention. And that leaves Joseph's account as the leading alternative.

In part 2, three contributors help us to understand this debate. Louis C. Midgley provides a long-needed history of the alternative accounts that first emerged even as the book was in press and that have since been elaborated and recycled many times. Midgley introduces the principal actors in this history, tracing their interrelationships and spelling out the logic of their positions. Daniel C. Peterson presents leading examples of the main types of contemporary criticisms of the Book of Mormon, shows their failings, and illustrates repeatedly how they can be turned into arguments that defend the Book of Mormon. Melvin J. Thorne explains widely used arguments that are based on the complexity of the Book of Mormon and gives a number of helpful examples.

## Notes

1. See "An Interview with Sterling McMurrin," *Dialogue* 17/1 (1984): 25; compare Gary F. Novak, "Naturalistic Assumptions and the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies* 30/3 (1990): 23–40