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Review of Elizabeth Fenton and Jared Hickman, *Americanist Approaches to* The Book of Mormon (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019). 456 pages. $99 (hardback), $35 (paperback).

Abstract: Americanist Approaches to The Book of Mormon *is an ambitious collection of essays published by Oxford University Press. By "Americanist" the editors refer to their preferred mode of contextualization: to situate the Book of Mormon as a response to various currents of nineteenth-century American thought. The "table rules" in this case determine who gets invited to the table and what topics can be discussed, using what types of evidence. The approach is legitimate, and the contributors offer a range of interesting perspectives and observations. Several essays base their arguments on the notion that the Book of Mormon adapts itself to a series of racist tropes common in the nineteenth century. In 2015, Ethan Sproat wrote an important essay that undercuts the arguments of those authors, but none of them address his case or evidence. This raises the issue of the existence of other tables operating under different assumptions, confronting the same text, and reaching very different conclusions. How are we to judge which table's rules produce the best readings?*

A*mericanist Approaches to The Book of Mormon* is an ambitious collection of essays published in 2019 by Oxford University Press.[1] By "Americanist," the editors refer to their preferred mode

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1. Elizabeth Fenton and Jared Hickman, eds., *Americanist Approaches to The Book of Mormon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019). In *Americanist Approaches*, the editors chose to formally refer to the Book of Mormon as *The Book*

of contextualization: to situate the Book of Mormon as a response to various currents of nineteenth-century American thought.

> The authors of this collection's essays approach *The Book of Mormon* from a variety of methodological and theological perspectives, but all share a commitment to taking seriously the book's relationship to and impact on the culture into which it emerged. (10)

The editors provide an introduction and then seventeen essays grouped as "Plates and Print," "Scripture and Secularity," "Indigeneity and Imperialism," and "Genre and Generation." Each essay takes a serious academic tone (for the most part[2]), and the attitudes vary from respect rooted in deep devotion and broad knowledge (Terryl Givens, Grant Hardy, and Amy Easton-Flake) to friendly (Paul Gutjahr and Elizabeth Fenton) to deeply skeptical (Peter Coviello, Eran Shalev, and R. John Williams). For instance, Flake's essay "'Arise From the Dust, My Sons, and Be Men'" explores the Book of Mormon's view of masculinity in light of nineteenth-century concepts of male and female roles, and concludes that "we find a new vision of ideal Christian manhood that challenges the idea that American religion was feminized in the nineteenth century" (370). Grant Hardy writes about "*The Book of Mormon* and the Bible," exploring the typological trends in nineteenth-century Americans identifying with Israel as background for the early audience as well as biblical quotation and various kinds of intertextuality within the Book of Mormon, including anachronism. In his essay "*The Book of Mormon* and the Reshaping of Covenant," Terryl Givens writes that "*The Book of Mormon* emerges in the context of the period's pervasive pseudo-biblicism and, more particularly, within a long tradition of covenantal rhetoric" (341). Paul Gutjahr writes about

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of Mormon, with the leading "The" capitalized and the title in italic. In quotes from *Americanist Approaches* this stylistic choice will be honored, except in the book's title. In the nonquoted material in this article references to the Book of Mormon are made in the traditional style. It can be argued that choosing to italicize the Book of Mormon as a book title while not italicizing the Bible as a book title is a subtle indicator of how the editors view the Book of Mormon relative to the Bible — the books do not deserve to be treated, in reference or in prose, the same.

2. R. John Williams indulges in mischievous snark at times. For example, in a footnote he refers to FARMS and "its alpha-male intellectual Hugh Nibley" (74n8). His comments in his footnote on Lehi christening a river after Laman (77n30) show that while he may have an awareness of Nibley's stature, he does not display familiarity with his work. The same neglect of Nibley's work appears in his reference to the Liahona as a "magical ball" (78n38).

"Orson Pratt's Enduring Influence on *The Book of Mormon*." Elizabeth Fenton writes about "Nephites and Israelites: *The Book of Mormon* and the Hebraic Indian Theory." Peter Coviello writes about "How the Mormons Became White," beginning with a scathing denunciation of Book of Mormon and Latter-day Saint racism and ugliness (259–60), moving to suggest, against his own opening sentiments, that perhaps, since the Lamanites survive with prophetic promises, there is also a possible "racial counternarrative" (262). He then discusses Latter-day Saint social history through the nineteenth century and concludes that "one obstacle to seeing clearly the counterracialist possibilities of *The Book of Mormon* … is the arc of nineteenth-century Mormonism itself" (274). R. John Williams writes of the impossibility of actually bracketing the question of historicity, of just letting the text speak for itself, arguing that neither Grant Hardy nor Earl Wunderli managed to bracket historicity fully but drew on outside materials in interpreting the text. He also discusses stories from the Book of Mormon in which angels, prophets, and Jesus are supplemented by books, and books by angels, prophets, and Jesus, showing that neither the immediacy of oral witness and preaching nor "the plain meaning of the text" is ever enough. He also discusses nineteenth-century contextual issues against which to situate Joseph Smith, such as Emanuel Swedenborg,[3] interest in and speculation about hieroglyphics, Masonic legends of Enoch, and the practice of using stereotype plates to simplify the printing of Bibles in Joseph Smith's day as a meaningful parallel to the story of the Golden Plates. Other topics in *Americanist Approaches* range across anachronism and temporal dislocation, oral and literate cultures, contemporary readings by an indigenous member, fiction about Columbus by Orson Scott Card, and even poetry about the Book of Mormon by nineteenth-century readers.

As an extended survey of our founding text from a prominent publisher, *Americanist Approaches* will be of interest to Latter-day Saint academics as a book to read to get to know what such an eminent and

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3. For a detailed look at Swedenborg and Smith, see Craig W. Miller, "Emanuel Swedenborg and Mormonism" at *Mormon Universalism* (blog), April 22, 2014, http://mormonuniversalism.com/2112/emanuel-swedenborg-and-mormonism/. See also J. B. Haws, "Joseph Smith, Emanuel Swedenborg, and Section 76: Importance of the Bible in Latter-day Revelation," in *The Doctrine and Covenants: Revelations in Context*, ed. Andrew H. Hedges, J. Spencer Fluhman, and Alonzo L. Gaskill (Provo, UT, and Salt Lake City: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, and Deseret Book, 2008), 142–67, https://rsc.byu.edu/doctrine-covenants-revelations-context/joseph-smith-emanuel-swedenborg-section-76-importance-bible.

emerging group of scholars have to say about our community-defining book, its place in nineteenth-century discourse, and significance for current study. Everyday members with devotional interests may not be as broadly interested or rewarded or as able to cope with the sometimes dense and abstract writing style.[4] While it is not a formal attack on faith and historicity in the vein of *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon*,[5] *American Apocrypha*,[6] or *The New Mormon Challenge*,[7] the editors have a clearly defined secular position that frames which questions can be asked, what evidence and conclusions can be discussed as well as who can be seated or can be insulted at this particular "table." Unlike, say, the Truman Madsen edited *Reflections on Mormonism*,[8] which provided the results of an invitation to a set of non-Latter-day Saint scholars to contribute to an open discussion of things Latter-day Saints, these editors invite a mixed group of scholars to a table with clear rules and boundaries.

While I won't discuss in any depth the entire range of topics offered in *Americanist Approaches*, there are a few things about the foundations and implications of the approach implicit in this volume (and the type of undertaking it represents) that I find instructive and worth a response. For more than three decades I have been fascinated with the difference paradigms can make in how people investigate and perceive the same subject — even, as we shall see, how different people interpret the same words. The existence of *Americanist Approaches* in comparison to other approaches again highlights the problem of how to navigate our differences in ways that are not completely paradigm-dependent. It should not be just a matter of using tribal allegiances and ideologically dependent arguments to guide our perceptions and consequent decisions. If we can be both critical and self-reflective, we can experience more expansion of

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4. For example, from R. John Williams, "Careful readers of Genette, however, will sometimes notice an occasionally irksome — perhaps even intentional — tension between what he offers as the categorical objectivity (the "undisputed territory," as he calls it) of paratextual mediation and what he acknowledges as the category's "potential for indefinite diffusion" (48).

5. Brent Lee Metcalf, ed., *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon: Explorations in Critical Methodology* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993).

6. Dan Vogel and Brent Lee Metcalf, eds., *American Apocrypha: Essays on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002).

7. Francis J. Beckwith, Carl Mosser, and Paul Owen, eds., *The New Mormon Challenge: Responding to the Latest Defenses of a Fast-Growing Movement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002).

8. Truman G. Madsen, ed., *Reflections on Mormonism: Judaeo-Christian Parallels* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1978).

the mind and enlargement of the soul, a more fruitful discovery.[9] If we can explore and compare different perspectives and arguments and then can explain "Why us?" in terms of values that are both comparative and not completely ideologically dependent; we can see more and understand better, both ourselves and our fellow travelers through life. Indeed, I will be comparing a foundational assumption of the readings and arguments that generated *Americanist Approaches* and the table rules that guide its inquiries and conversations with an important essay by Ethan Sproat[10] that happens to completely undercut that assumption and, therefore, undermines the readings erected on them.

Setting the Table

This particular table has been set by editors Elizabeth Fenton and Jared Hickman. Fenton is a professor of English and a Catholic scholar at the University of Vermont. In a review of Grant Hardy's *Understanding the Book of Mormon* published in the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, she recounted how she was given a Book of Mormon on Halloween by two sister missionaries that she had mistaken for trick-or-treaters. After reading the book, she reports that "I wanted to enter this conversation as a scholar of early US literature and as someone who loved the book immediately upon reading it but did not believe it to be a sacred text."[11]

Hickman is an associate professor of English, now teaching at John Hopkins University. He made a splash in academic circles by publishing an essay called "*The Book of Mormon* as Amerindian Apocalypse" in 2014.[12] Here is the abstract:

> *The Book of Mormon* is perhaps best known in Americanist circles as a version of the Indians-as-Israelites theory. It features the racialized division of the progeny of the text's founding diasporic Jewish figure, Lehi, into wicked "Lamanites," who are cursed with "a skin of blackness" and were understood by the earliest readers to be the ancestors

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9. For a scriptural exposition on expansion, enlargement, and fruitful discoveries, see Alma 32.

10. Ethan Sproat, "Skins as Garments in the Book of Mormon: A Textual Exegesis," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 24/1 (2015), 138–64, https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1572&context=jbms.

11. Elizabeth Fenton, "Understanding the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 25 (2016), 38, https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol25/iss1/5/.

12. Jared Hickman, "*The Book of Mormon* as Amerindian Apocalypse," *American Literature* 86.3 (September 2014), 429–61, https://doi.org/10.1215/00029831-2717371.

of Amerindian peoples, and the righteous "Nephites," the fair-skinned narrators of *The Book of Mormon*. This essay shows how *The Book of Mormon's* foundational raci(al)ist orthodoxy autodeconstructs, and in so doing not only offers a vision of racial apocalypse diametrically opposed to what would come to be known as Manifest Destiny — one resonant with contemporaneous Amerindian prophetic movements — but also challenges the literalist hermeneutics that found warrant for Euro-Christian colonization in the transcendental authority of "the Bible alone."

Hickman's essay has a clear influence on the construction and content of *Americanist Approaches*; though not included, it is cited by several authors in the volume. In their introduction, Fenton and Hickman describe the Book of Mormon's account of Nephites and Lamanites this way:

This spiritual distinction is underscored in the text in two ways: by privileging the Nephite perspective — they are the narrators of *The Book of Mormon*; and by racializing the Lamanites as undesirably nonwhite — the Nephite narrative describes them as "curs[ed]" with a "skin of blackness." However, the text also undermines this distinction: by depicting phases of Lamanite righteousness and Nephite wickedness, but, above all, by having the Lamanites eventually emerge, within the narrative frame, as the victors of a millennium of intermittent warfare and by making their descendants — widely understood by early Mormons to be contemporary Native American — the narrative's most pertinent addressees. (2)

Fenton and Hickman discuss the challenges in dealing with the Book of Mormon in an academic setting by nonbelievers:

On the basis of that description, one can perhaps readily see why *The Book of Mormon* has been deemed by many Americanist scholars as either too hot to handle or unworthy of handling with care. (2)

In the course of discussing various critical approaches they make a very good observation as to why different approaches to any text might be called for at different times:

When certain established ways of reading a text are perceived as having obscured key elements of the text, a recommitment

> to the primariness of the primary text is justified, which of course skews the secondary field in different directions, requiring subsequent recommitments to the primary text. Indeed, this seems a working description of how the business of literary criticism actually works. (7)

I quote this passage to show the editors' approach and also to foreshadow what I intend to do further along. They describe their position as follows:

> The thesis here is simple: An attentive surface reading of *The Book of Mormon* shows that it arguably never portrays itself as an ancient text, that is, a text in any conventional sense composed within and thus conditioned by the limited spatiotemporal context of seventh-century BCE Palestine or third-century CE Central America. (7)

They justify this thesis by citing what they perceive as "ostentatious anachronism" (9) and say that "Americanists are only doing what *The Book of Mormon* asks by reading it as a text that speaks primarily to the American nineteenth century in which it knew, so to speak, it would come forth" (9).

The first essay by Julian Sayre, "Books Buried in the Earth: *The Book of Mormon*, Revelation, and the Humic Foundations of the Nation," briefly discusses the famous "mound-builder theories" (35) in the relation to the Book of Mormon. In another essay, "How the Mormons Became White: Scripture, Sex, Sovereignty," Peter Coviello delves further:

> In this way, *The Book of Mormon* adapts itself to a series of drearily familiar racist tropes of the American nineteenth century: about Indians as remnants of the lost tribes of Israel, or, more saliently, about nonwhiteness as a God-ordained and indelible accursedness. *The Book of Mormon*, we might say, swallows these conventional racist premises whole, and metabolizes them into an intractably racist cosmology, haphazardly wrought round with a settler-colonial white supremacism that will be unfamiliar to few students of antebellum America. (259)

Having administered this blow, Coviello then discusses the kinds of things Hickman had argued in his "Amerindian Apocalypse" essay, noting how the Lamanites do turn out to be the recipients of blessings and later Latter-day Saint appreciation. He produces some back and forth on the topic but makes pointed mention of an interpretive tendency "that reads *The Book of Mormon* as a text overspilling with

the racial presumptions of its moment of composition: a recapitulation of nineteenth-century colonizing racism at its most uncontoured" (261).

Fenton's follow-up essay, titled "Nephites and Israelites," makes further comparisons, and significant contrasts, between "*The Book of Mormon* and the Hebraic Indian Theory" (277). Kimberly Berkey and Joseph Spencer provide another related exploration in "'Great Cause to Mourn': The Complexity of *The Book of Mormon*'s Presentation of Gender and Race," which includes comparison and contrast of Jacob's early critique of Nephites compared to Lamanites (citing the racist-sounding curse) and the later critique offered by Samuel the Lamanite toward the Nephites from the position of despised outsider.

Several of the essays resonate with the perspectives of Hickman's "Amerindian Apocalypse":

> In sum, although the white Nephite narrators, like many nineteenth-century romantic racialists, accept being upstaged by the dark Other, they reserve for themselves the indispensable function of stage-managing the eschatological drama. For all its self-critique, the eschatology proffered by the white Nephite narrators preserves, in somewhat softer form, white Nephite superiority and centrality.[13]

Notice that in making this judgment and offering this reading, Hickman has occupied an analogous function of stage-managing his own twenty-first-century academic superiority. This is the sort of circumstance for which the Irony Police should exist. Though, of course, they will come for me too, this situation being "turtles all the way down," as the saying goes.[14]

Ethan Sproat as Uninvited to the Table

A few years ago I read a 2015 essay in the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies,* called "Skins as Garments in the Book of Mormon," by Ethan Sproat, who has a PhD in English rhetoric and composition and teaches at Utah Valley University. He makes a detailed case that the racial reading of the Lamanite curse and Nephite whiteness was a distortion of Mormon's text caused by nineteenth-century readers seeing what they already thought they knew. I have already quoted several passages in which several contributors to *Americanist Approaches* emphasize that

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13. Hickman, "Amerindian Apocalypse," 443, https://archive.org/stream/pdfy-pfKehmZYZ4d6yse1/hickman-amerindian-apocalypse_djvu.txt.

14. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turtles_all_the_way_down.

the racism they see in the Book of Mormon reflects something that was preexisting and deeply rooted in American culture. Sproat, I noticed, had read Hickman's "Amerindian Apocalypse" essay and refers to its arguments in his essay.[15]

When I read Sproat's essay, I was powerfully impressed and immediately spent some time looking around the web to see how much discussion that essay has generated. At the time, I noticed only a couple of footnotes at the *Book of Mormon Central* website and one mention at the *By Common Consent* website in discussion of a Michael Austin post.[16] Fairly early in the blog discussion, a reader pointed to Sproat's recent essay and asked whether anyone had read it. The discussion of Austin's post went on for a few dozen comments, but apparently no one bothered to read Sproat's essay or consider its profound implications for the discussion. One commentator at *By Common Consent* made this statement as a direct response to the recommendation that Sproat's essay even be considered:

> I've seen arguments by those who try to explain that "skin" in the Book of Mormon really means a "spiritual skin," something metaphorical. But that is what we might call wresting the scriptures. It's an attempt to take the inherent racist attitudes that are plain in the book and twist them to something more politically correct. It's very obvious that "skin" in the Book of Mormon means "skin." Just as "north" means "north," not some other direction.[17]

That particular comment stands out to me in relation to this leading point in Sproat's essay:

> Alma 3:5–6 is comprised of two sentences, in each of which the word *skin(s)* appears. Commentaries handle the two

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15.   Sproat refers to Hickman's essay in 143n12 and 143n13. It is also of interest that Joseph Spencer was the editor of the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* when Sproat's essay appeared, and that Kimberly Berkey also had an essay in that same volume. However, in Berkey and Spencer's essay on gender and race for *Americanist Approaches* (298–320), while they approvingly cite Hickman's "Amerindan Apocalypse" (316n8, 318n24, 319n32), they do not mention Sproat. Why? If anyone in *Americanist Approaches* could have been expected to mention Sproat in an essay on race in the Book of Mormon, it was them.

16.   Michael Austin, "Laman's Curse: Etiology and Race in the Book of Mormon," *By Common Consent* (blog), February 3, 2016, https://bycommonconsent. com/2016/02/03/65607/.

17.   Comment by Lew Scannon, February 4, 2016, at 12:25 pm, https:// bycommonconsent.com/2016/02/03/65607/#comment-366408.

sentences in one of three ways: (1) by treating both of them independently, as if two very different things were at issue; (2) by commenting on only the second of the two sentences, remaining silent about the first; or (3) by failing to comment on either sentence. All three of these approaches miss the fact that, when read in context, the use of *skins* in the second sentence appears to form part of a historical explanation of the use of *skin* in the first sentence. Here is the text:

> Now the heads of the Lamanites were shorn; and they were naked, save it were *skin* which was girded about their loins, and also their armor, which was girded about them, and their bows, and their arrows, and their stones, and their slings, and so forth. And the *skins* of the Lamanites were dark, according to the mark which was set upon their fathers, which was a curse upon them because of their transgression and their rebellion against their brethren, who consisted of Nephi, Jacob, and Joseph, and Sam, who were just and holy men. (Alma 3:5–6)

According to a reading I will defend in the course of this article, this passage suggests the possibility that "the skins of the Lamanites" are to be understood as articles of clothing, the notable girdle of skin that these particular Lamanites wear to cover their nakedness. Significantly, these are the only two references to skins in Alma 3, which contains the Book of Mormon's most thorough explanation of the Lamanite curse and the curse's relationship to skins. Thus situated, Alma 3:5–6 might serve as an interpretive Rosetta stone. If both instances of skins in Alma 3:5–6 refer to clothing, then the other five references to various-colored or cursed skins in the Book of Mormon could also refer to clothing and not — as traditionally assumed — to human flesh pigmentation.[18]

Notice the knee-jerk argument I quoted earlier, that "skin means skin," the appeal to "obviousness," the charge of "wresting the scriptures," and no evidence that the one who made the objection had read or considered the scriptural evidence cited in Sproat's essay. Notably in Alma 3:5-6, the reference to "skin girded about their loins" contradicts the objection that

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18. Sproat, "Skins as Garments," 139-40.

"skin means skin," that is the word *skin always* and obviously refers to human epidermis. Skins can also be garments.[19]

Not only did our dismissive commentator fail to read or consider Sproat's essay, but he justified his neglect by invoking a paradigmatic narrative: "It's an attempt to take the inherent racist attitudes that are plain in the book and twist them to something more politically correct." The narrative is based entirely on what he imagines of Sproat, rather than on any direct observation or engagement with Sproat's arguments.

Sadly, this sort of ideological dismissal is not uncommon in human experience. Ironically, it demonstrates exactly the sort of mental shortcut that supports any prejudice, including racism. We all filter and value our facts through a set of internalized stories and metaphors. Hayden White explains:

> We should no longer naively expect that statements about a given epoch or complex of events in the past "correspond" to some pre-existent body of "raw facts." For we should recognize that *what constitutes the facts themselves* is the problem that the historian, like the artist, has tried to solve in the choice of the metaphor by which he orders his world, past, present, and future.[20]

The commenter at *By Common Consent* solves the problem of addressing the arguments made in Sproat's essay by creating a narrative/metaphor by which he ordered his world — past, present, and indeed, future — in which "there is nothing to see here folks, move along." Yet, having read Sproat, I can affirm that there *is* something to see, and would invite readers to stop and take the time to feast.

Sproat's essay is important and profound and packs its pages with an extensive and coherent set of arguments that range far beyond the two passages in Alma 3, including Hebrew syntax, temple and covenant contexts, and priesthood vestments. He does mention several Book of Mormon passages that discuss clean and filthy garments, but he could have added many more. I, and others, have long noticed that Book of

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19. And on the commenter's related point about *north* means "north," see Brant A. Gardner, "From the East to the West: The Problem of Direction in the Book of Mormon," presentation at the 2012 Fair Conference, https://www.fairmormon.org/conference/august-2012/from-the-east-to-the-west-the-problem-of-directions-in-the-book-of-mormon. See also Lawrence Poulson, "Book of Mormon Geography," presentation at the 2008 FAIR Conference, https://www.fairmormon.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/2008-Larry-Poulsen.pdf.

20. Hayden V. White, "The Burden of History," *History and Theory* 5.2 (1966), 131, https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/pb-assets/assets/14682303/1BurdenofHistory1966-1526389876757.pdf.

Mormon passages consistently discuss garments and robes in ways that directly parallel the passages about white, pure, and filthy skins. Here I present a representative sampling of such passages.

- **1 Nephi 21:18:** "Lift up thine eyes round about and behold; all these gather themselves together, and they shall come to thee. And as I live, saith the Lord, thou shalt surely clothe them all, as with an ornament, and bind them on even as a bride."
- **2 Nephi 7:3:** "I clothe the heavens with blackness, and I make sackcloth their covering" (quoting Isaiah 50:3 in a section discussing how people forsake God by violating covenants).
- **2 Nephi 9:14:** "being clothed with purity, yea, even with the robe of righteousness" (Jacob speaking as a consecrated High Priest on the Day of Atonement)
- **Jacob 1:19:** "by laboring with our might their blood might not come upon our garments; otherwise their blood would come upon our garments, and we would not be found spotless at the last day."
- **Jacob 3:5:** "the cursing which hath come upon their skins"
- **Jacob 3:8–9:** "their skins will be whiter than yours … revile no more against them because of the darkness of their skins"
- **Mosiah 2:28:** "I have caused that ye should assemble yourselves together that I might rid my garments of your blood" (King Benjamin speaking at the temple as High Priest with a Day of Atonement context).
- **Alma 5:21–24:** Garments stained with blood and all manner of filthiness contrasted with prophets whose garments are cleansed and are spotless, pure, and white
- **Alma 7:25:** "having your garments spotless … in the kingdom of heaven"
- **Alma 13:11–12:** "garments were washed white through the blood of the Lamb … garments made white, being pure and spotless before God"
- **Alma 34:36:** "in his kingdom … their garments should be made white through the blood of the Lamb"
- **Helaman 9:31–34:** A prophetic story in which the symbolic use and the literal use combine, as the blood on garments testify to a murder committed

- **3 Nephi 11:8:** "And it came to pass, as they understood they cast their eyes up again towards heaven; and behold, they saw a Man descending out of heaven; and he was clothed in a white robe."
- **3 Nephi 19:25:** "And it came to pass that Jesus blessed them as they did pray unto him; and his countenance did smile upon them, and the light of his countenance did shine upon them, and behold, they were as white as the countenance, and also the garments of Jesus; and behold the whiteness thereof did exceed all the whiteness, yea there could be nothing upon earth so white as the whiteness thereof."
- **3 Nephi 19:29–30:** Jesus prays "that they may be purified in me … as thou, Father, art in me; … and behold they did pray steadfastly, without ceasing, unto him; and he did smile upon them again; and behold they were white, even as Jesus" (compare with Moroni 7: the sons of God, … we shall be like him … purified even as he is pure").
- **3 Nephi 27:19:** "no unclean thing can enter into his kingdom … save it be those who have washed their garments in my blood."
- **4 Nephi 24:** pride and costly apparel again appear among the people.
- **Mormon 9:34:** Garments and the priestly obligation to testify to "rid our garments of the blood of our brethren"
- **Ether 12:37:** "thy garments shall be made clean, … sitting down in the place which I have prepared in the mansions of my Father."
- **Ether 12:38:** "my garments are not spotted with your blood"
- **Moroni 10:31:** "put on thy beautiful garments, O daughter of Zion"

Commentators such as Hugh Nibley, John Sorenson, Brant Gardner, and Matt Roper have long noted that in the Book of Mormon, *Lamanite* very early on becomes a generic political designation rather than one of genealogy, "friendlies and unfriendlies," rather than good guys and bad guys.

> Now the people which were not Lamanites were Nephites; nevertheless, they were called Nephites, Jacobites, Josephites, Zoramites, Lamanites, Lemuelites, and Ishmaelites. But I, Jacob, shall not hereafter distinguish them by these names, but I shall call them Lamanites that seek to destroy the people

of Nephi, and those who are friendly to Nephi I shall call Nephites, or the people of Nephi. (Jacob 1:13–14)

The supposed division as white and righteous Nephites versus cursed and dark and unrighteous Lamanites runs aground on very next verse in Jacob, which says that "the people of Nephi, under the reign of the second king, began to grow hard in their hearts, and indulge themselves somewhat in wicked practices" (Jacob 1:15).

Beyond this, Nibley, Sorenson, and Gardner have for decades cited Ancient Near Eastern colloquialisms that use "skin of blackness" imagery and language in the Book of Mormon for the same purpose that Sproat discerns. Sproat mentions such work in his essay, but then states that "it should also be noted that such Near Eastern cultural observations ultimately originate outside the actual text of the Book of Mormon or KJV."[21] His own argument focuses on the internal Book of Mormon text.

While several of the authors in *Americanist Approaches* note and appreciate the role-shifting tension between Nephites and Lamanites in the Book of Mormon, any consideration of authors who brought in Ancient Near Eastern or Mesoamerican cultural backgrounds has been ruled out by the premises of their Americanist approach.

> Science does not deal in all possible laboratory manipulations. Instead, it selects those relevant to the juxtaposition of a paradigm with the immediate experience that the paradigm has partially determined. As a result, scientists with different paradigms engage in different concrete laboratory manipulations.[22]

The conspicuous lack of mention or response to Sproat's essay — let alone response to any significant work done by people such as Nibley, Sorenson, Roper, Welch, Gardner, and scores of others — is a consequence of how *Americanist Approaches* embodies a paradigmatic limitation on the acceptable "methods, problem-field, and standards of solution."[23] Indeed, *Americanist Approaches* takes a frankly and formally hostile attitude toward any serious discussion of the work of by Latter-day Saint scholars who argue for the historicity of the Book of Mormon.

> When it repudiates a past [or current rival] paradigm, a scientific community simultaneously renounces, as a fit

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21. Sproat, "Skins as Garments," 145n14.

22. Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions,* 4th ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 126

23. Ibid., 103.

subject for professional scrutiny, most of the books and articles in which that paradigm had been embodied.[24]

The limitation on "methods, problem-field, and standards of solution" in *Americanist Approaches* is done for understandable purposes, to enable a conversation, "an experiment upon" even "a portion" of the words (Alma 32:27) in the Book of Mormon. But such choices also limit what we, as readers, can see and consider. At least, such choices limit what is served at that table. There are, though, other tables to choose from, and that means some means of comparison is necessary.

On the Problem with Seeing What We Expect and Obviousness

Thomas Kuhn reports that "no part of the aim of normal science is to call forth new sorts of phenomena; indeed those that will not fit the box are not often seen at all. … Normal-scientific research is directed to the articulation of those phenomena and theories that the paradigm already supplies."[25] He describes an experiment in which subjects were to "identify on short and controlled exposure a series of playing cards. Many of the cards were normal, but some were made anomalous, e.g., a red six of spades and a black four of hearts."[26] He describes how initially, "the anomalous cards were almost always identified, without apparent hesitation or puzzlement, as normal. The black four of hearts might, for example, be identified as the four of either spades or hearts. Without any awareness of trouble, it was immediately fitted to one of the conceptual categories prepared by prior experience."[27] It generally took time before subjects noticed that something was off, and that led to a period of confusion, until *most* subjects finally learned to see what was there, instead of what they expected to see.

I've personally experienced a similar sort of blindness when, for example, my wife asks me to get some food item in the kitchen, and my expectation of one kind of package blinds me to the presence of what I seek in a different form. Kuhn tells the story to make the point that "in science, as in the playing card experiment, novelty emerges only with difficulty, manifested by resistance, against a background provided by expectation."[28] This sort of thing is also the point of the New Testament story in which Nicodemus says to Jesus, "How can a man be born when

24. Ibid., 166, bracketed text inserted by me.
25. Ibid., 24.
26. Ibid., 62-63.
27. Ibid., 63.
28. Ibid., 64.

he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb, and be born?" (John 3:4). After making an explanation based on the Temple traditions and Nicodemus still resists, Jesus asks, "Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things?" (John 3:10). As Margaret Barker explains, the point of this kind of story in John is to demonstrate that the "Jews no longer understood their own heritage."[29]

One of the important observations made by several of the authors in *Americanist Approaches* who discuss apparent racial issues in the Book of Mormon is that the nineteenth-century readers did not approach the text as blank slates, but came as readers prepared by their times and cultures with a set of conceptual categories and preexisting narratives such as the "Mound Builder Myth." Indeed, I noted how several *Americanist Approaches* authors make a point of commenting on how it seems to them the Book of Mormon expresses "all too familiar" nineteenth-century racial attitudes. If we take Sproat's observations seriously, that inherent, preexisting cultural baggage was the problem, and their cultural preconditioning too easily becomes an obstacle to our understanding the Book of Mormon text. That is, the nineteenth-century view seriously handicaps our perception.[30]

The problem of preexisting attitudes and expectations as impediments to learning is one of the themes of the Book of Mormon and the Bible. Nephi pointedly discusses how "there is none other people that understand the things which were spoken unto the Jews like unto them, save it be that they are taught after the manner of the things of the Jews" (2 Nephi 25:5). Jesus states that we're much better off being self-critical first, examining our own eyes for beams, before rushing to judgment; "then shalt thou see clearly" (Matthew 7:5). Jesus uses the parable of the sower (Mark 4:1–33) to explain that the same words can

29. See Margaret Barker, *Temple Mysticism: An Introduction* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2011), 100–103. Also Margaret Barker, *King of the Jews: Temple Theology in John's Gospel* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2014), 198–205. "Nicodemus did not understand this language of divine birth, and yet it had once been in the Hebrew Scriptures; the royal birth ritual was described in Psalm 110, but 'corrected' out of the Hebrew text as a blasphemy, and then rebranded and redefined by Deuteronomy" (Ibid., 200).

30. My review of Dan Vogel's *Indian Origins and the Book of Mormon* makes a case that even the Wentworth Letter misreads the Book of Mormon in several ways due to this kind of cultural preconditioning. See Kevin Christensen, "Dan Vogel, *Indian Origins and the Book of Mormon*," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 2/1 (1990), 214–57, https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1073&context=msr.

yield very different harvests, depending on the context in which they are placed and the care and nurture given.

For instance, in the Book of Mormon the word *language* sometimes refers to Hebrew, Egyptian, Reformed Egyptian, or the unknown language of the 24 Jaredite plates. Other times, though, it refers to what is literally "on the tongues" of the people in the sense of the topics of conversation and the attitudes expressed. At times, readers should be cautious as to which meaning best applies, as in the appearance of Sherem in Jacob 7:4. In 3 Nephi, Jesus talks about the notion of other sheep, and how the Old World disciples "because of stiffneckedness and unbelief they understood not my word" (3 Nephi 15:18). Even though they were committed disciples, they misunderstood in large measure because they "supposed" they understood what Jesus was talking about (3 Nephi 15:22). Later, Jesus tells the multitude at the Temple in 3 Nephi that "ye are weak, that ye cannot understand all my words" and urges them to go and "prepare your minds" (3 Nephi 17:2–3). In the New Testament, Jesus talks about how nobody "having drunk old wine straightway desireth new: for he saith, The old is better" (Luke 5:39).

Personally, I've tried the new wine, and I like it better. I admit the appeal of having a foundational text that is not inherently racist, but I also assert that I have broader basis for my preference than a desire to adhere to learned, modern cultural values. Before reading Sproat I had read Nibley, Sorenson, Gardner, Roper, and others, as well as the Book of Mormon on my own. I believe Sproat's general case is testable, accurate in its key predictions, comprehensive and coherent over a broad range of material, with cultural evidence previously asserted by Nibley, Sorenson, Gardner and others. I find the approach fruitful, aesthetically pleasing, and promising. For those reasons, I find it a better reading than those offered in *Americanist Approaches* on this issue. Sproat himself concludes:

> Rather than attempting, like earlier interpretations, to make the Book of Mormon cohere with current sensibilities, I mean here to examine the text itself more closely to suggest a different interpretive model that is more internally coherent than previous models. As with any new contribution to any larger conversation of textual interpretations, I look forward to seeing how those who adhere to previous interpretations might respond to the interpretive model I've articulated throughout this article.

> More to the point, those who want to claim that the Nephites are white and the Lamanites are black in a racial sense must especially justify their position through careful reanalysis of the relevant texts.[31]

What reasons might there be for resisting or dismissing or ignoring Sproat's approach? There is appeal to tradition and the opinions of traditional Latter-day Saint authorities, as well the opinions of those highly educated writers in *Americanist Approaches* who build their cases within that traditional view. Even Kuhn indicates that one notable reason scientists sometimes use to justify a paradigm choice and resist new ideas is the reputation or nationality of particular teachers.[32] However, Kuhn does not recommend such appeals to authority and tradition as the most important and relevant values upon which to base important decisions. And the Latter-day Saint scriptures do not enshrine traditional understandings and traditional authorities as absolute or infallible. Quite the opposite.

What about Latter-day Saints and what we can realistically expect from our leaders? The Lord has recognized their humanity from the beginning, bluntly stating, "inasmuch as they erred it might be made known" (D&C 1:25) and declares that learning is conditioned on both inquiry and knowledge that comes from time to time. And our regular ritual of sustaining our leaders is based on a word whose meanings include "endure," "suffer," and "allow."

Of the Latter-day Saints, Joseph Smith observes that

> there has been a great difficulty in getting anything into the heads of this generation. It has been like splitting hemlock knots with a corn-dodger for a wedge, and a pumpkin for a beetle. Even the Saints are slow to understand.

> I have tried for a number of years to get the minds of the Saints prepared to receive the things of God; but we frequently see some of them, after suffering all they have for the work of God, will fly to pieces like glass as soon as anything comes that is contrary to their traditions: they cannot stand the fire at all.[33]

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31. Sproat, "Skins as Garments," 165. Further, if racial language was intended, why not red Lamanites, rather than black? What language would make the most sense for Joseph Smith to use in a nineteenth-century environment, in a text about "the former inhabitants of the land?"

32. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 152–53.

33. *History of the Church*, 6:184–85; from a discourse given by Joseph Smith on January 21, 1844, in Nauvoo, Illinois. Reported by Wilford

Jesus himself asks, "Why do ye also transgress the commandment of God by your tradition?" (Matthew 15:3) and tells the parable of the wine bottles, targeting the minds of those who reflexively assume that "the old is better" (Luke 5:37-39). Again, Nephi says that we cannot "understand the things which were spoken unto the Jews … save [we] are taught after the manner of the things of the Jews" (2 Nephi 25:5). Kuhn illustrates the process:

> Looking at a contour map, the student sees lines on paper, the cartographer a picture of a terrain. Looking at a bubble-chamber photograph, the student sees confused and broken lines, the physicist a record of familiar subnuclear events. Only after a number of such transformations of vision does the student become an inhabitant of the scientist's world, seeing what the scientist sees and responding as the scientist does.[34]

So it takes practice and experience for a newcomer to see what the practiced and experienced see as obvious. But there are circumstances in which what a person has learned to see as "obvious" can be tragically misleading, as Shakespeare's Othello would be all too able to tell you. That is also the point of Kuhn calling his book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, describing the kind of circumstances in which, "led by a new paradigm, scientists adopt new instruments and look in new places. Even more important, during revolutions scientists see new and different things when looking with familiar instruments in places they have looked before. It is rather as if the professional community had been suddenly transported to another planet where familiar objects are seen in a different light and are joined by unfamiliar ones as well."[35]

Some critics, seeing themselves as obviously superior moral beings, savor comparing their views to retrograde attitudes seemingly expressed in the Book of Mormon and those expressed by various Latter-day Saints, past and present. If I accept Sproat's reading, I have to acknowledge my own past errors and my personal and community susceptibility to misreading. I have to acknowledge that there have been beams in my own eye that I had to remove to see clearly (Matthew 7:1-5). I have to acknowledge that I might have to repent of something. However, by rejecting Sproat and others who argue in consonant ways, I would remain in a position to judge the Book of Mormon as racist and would

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Woodruff, journal available at https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/09e6d1b1-cd59-41d4-bc46-e3d74899ceac/0/195.

34. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 112.

35. Ibid., 111

have leverage and reason to position myself in moral opposition (and moral superiority) to it and the community that it defines. That reading of inherent racism removes my personal need to repent and leaves that necessity in the laps of the benighted Latter-day Saints. For some people, the reversal of moral high ground that accepting Sproat's case involves would be undesirable for social reasons.

> Like the choice between competing political institutions, that between competing paradigms proves to be a choice between incompatible modes of community life. Because it has that character, the choice is not and cannot be determined merely by the evaluative procedures characteristic of normal science, for these depend in part upon a particular paradigm, and that paradigm is at issue. When paradigms enter, as they must, into a debate about paradigm choice, their role is necessarily circular. Each group uses its own paradigm to argue in that paradigm's defense.[36]

On Puzzles and Counterinstances

Kuhn observes that "every problem that normal science sees as a puzzle can be seen, from another viewpoint, as a counterinstance and thus as a source of crisis."[37] And "since no paradigm ever solves all the problems it defines and since no two paradigms leave all the same problems unsolved, paradigm debates always involve the question: Which problems is it more significant to have solved?"[38]

From the outset, Fenton and Hickman declare that anachronism is the most important problem to have solved with respect to defining their approach to the Book of Mormon. That is, they see apparent anachronism as definitive counterinstances that determine both the validity of their approach and the futility of even considering historicity. In their words, the Book of Mormon "is a remarkably assured and comprehensive prolepsis. Its anachronism is unembarrassedly integral" (7).

> That is, the text is self-consciously and committedly anachronistic and asks to be entertained as such. … If this premise is granted, the historicity debate suddenly looks quite different. Specifically, arguments for *The Book of Mormon*'s modernity become depolemicized to the extent it is conceded that the text actually does not pretend to be ancient or artifactual but rather flaunts the

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36. Ibid., 94
37. Ibid., 80.
38. Ibid., 109.

fact that its narrative form and content are ultimately determined by an implied reader — or, more strongly, a prophetically presenced reader — that is modern. (8–9)

What evidence is offered that the Book of Mormon is a modern composition? Various authors mention Hebrew origin theories circulating before and during Joseph Smith's lifetime, the supposed conformity of the Book of Mormon to unsavory white supremacy narratives, and New Testament language anachronistically appearing in the Book of Mormon. But there is, by design, no serious engagement with the Latter-day Saint scholarship that makes the case for antiquity and that has addressed the question of anachronism. The one passage that gets cited by various authors in *Americanist Approaches* is this passage: "I speak the same words unto one nation like unto another. And when the two nations shall run together the testimony of the two nations shall run together also" (2 Nephi 29:8). They see it as a possible "reasonable" explanation, and also a possible "get out of jail free" card that the Saints uncritically use to cover a multitude of intellectual and textual sins.

But there is much more to the topic of anachronism than has been allowed at the *Americanist Approaches* table. As Kuhn says, "No part of the aim of normal science is to call forth new sorts of phenomena; indeed those that will not fit the box are often not seen at all."[39] I've been exploring the charge for more than three decades, being attentive to the work of others and occasionally making my own contributions. Consider one offhand remark by Grant Hardy in his contribution to *Americanist Approaches*, drawing on Blake Ostler's famous 1987 *Dialogue* essay on "The Book of Mormon as a Modern Expansion of an Ancient Source."

> For instance, Blake Ostler has pointed out how a discussion at 2 Ne 9:12–18 concerning deliverance from spiritual death and temporal death (a nonbiblical distinction common in the nineteenth century) incorporates multiple phrases from Matthew, Hebrews, and Revelation. At the same time, he notes that this is not simply a linguistic overlay: "Jacob's speech reinterprets the KJV snippets into a new synthesis on death, resurrection, and judgement. … These phrases may represent interpretation of an original text using the KJV New Testament and a nineteenth-century theological framework. Yet it is clear that the KJV New Testament phrases have become part of the structure itself. (128)

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39. Ibid., 24.

Now while both Hardy and Ostler make numerous excellent observations, I, at least, notice that it is possible to compare the same 2 Nephi 9:12–18 passages with various Old Testament and *1 Enoch* passages as well as composition techniques demonstrated in the Dead Sea Scrolls. I did just that in an essay published in 1990.[40] I have seen claims to have found that decisively telling anachronism be undercut by new information scores of times.[41] Indeed, I took the notion that the Book of Mormon is

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40. Christensen, "Dan Vogel, *Indian Origins and the Book of Mormon*," 241–46.

41. Consider a review by Matt Roper of Jerald and Sandra Tanner's *Covering Up the Black Hole in the Book of Mormon* (Matthew Roper, "Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Covering Up the Black Hole in the Book of Mormon*," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 3/1 (1990), 171–81, https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1054&context=msr). Roper responds to the Tanners' charges of anachronistic New Testament plagiarism based on computer research. Roper notes that he used the same computer media and that the Tanners failed to note where the New Testament phrasing they cited had Old Testament verbal and conceptual equivalents. John Tvedtnes provided a separate review in the same volume (John A. Tvedtnes, "Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Covering Up the Black Hole in the Book of Mormon*," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 3/1 (1990), 188–230, https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1057&context=msr). Tvedtnes's review also includes a detailed discussion of supposed New Testament anachronisms.

In a subsequent issue of the *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 6/2 (1994), 235–36, Tvedtnes also showed how much of the Gettysburg address uses Biblical language, while remaining an original composition, applying "Bible words to *entirely different circumstances,* yet were appropriate to those circumstances." (See John A. Tvedtnes, "Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Answering Mormon Scholars: A Response to Criticism of the Book 'Covering Up the Black Hole in the Book of Mormon*," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 6/2 (1994), 137, https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1227&context=msr.) See, also, John A. Tvedtnes and Matthew Roper, "'Joseph Smith's Use of the Apocrypha': Shadow or Reality?," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 8/2 (1996), 326–72, https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1306&context=msr.

In a recent essay Nicholas Frederick indicated that "the task of identifying New Testament parallels within the Book of Mormon has largely been taken up by those hostile to the Book of Mormon, such as Jerald and Sandra Tanner" (Nicholas J. Frederick, "Evaluating the Interaction between the New Testament and the Book of Mormon: A Proposed Methodology," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 24/1 (2015), 4n6, https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1567&context=jbms.). Frederick does not mention the detailed responses to the Tanners by Tvedtnes and Roper, nor the several others who would be relevant to the issue. I noticed, for instance, several places where Margaret Barker's work would be relevant to his concerns. For example, compare Frederick, "Evaluating the Interaction," 7, around "believing on his name" with Margaret Barker, *The Great Angel: A Study of Israel's Second God* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1992),

obviously "too Christian before Christ" as a puzzle to consider, rather than as a counterinstance that settles the whole problem by itself. There is an important dimension of the Book of Mormon as "too Christian before Christ" that these authors do not touch.[42] It was my awareness of the puzzle that enabled me to see the significance of Margaret Barker's scholarship.[43] With no thought whatsoever of the Book of Mormon but rather a desire to explore Christian origins, she sought to recover First Temple Judaism and to independently describe what was going on in Jerusalem in the days of Josiah and Jeremiah as crucial for finding the roots of Christianity. If I had despaired of the puzzle before chancing upon Barker's *The Great Angel* on a visit to a Dallas bookstore in 1999, I would not only have missed crucial knowledge and what has become a great intellectual and spiritual adventure, but I also would not have even known what I was missing.

I've often quoted Ian Barbour on the limits of verification and of falsification:

> No scientific theory can be *verified*. One cannot prove that a theory is true by showing that conclusions deduced from it agree with experiment, since (1) future experiments may

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208–12, on what "the name" meant in First Temple theology. But Frederick does not consider Barker. The *Book of Mormon Central* website also addresses the issue of New Testament phrasing, see https://knowhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/knowhy/why-do-new-testament-words-and-phrases-show-up-in-the-book-of-mormon

42. One book mentioned by several *Americanist Approaches* authors is Ethan Smith's *View of the Hebrews.* In a review of BYU's 1996 edition of that book, Andrew Hedges considers the "long and venerable" tradition that book exemplified, and shows that "it is generally so complex as to be quite inflexible, based as it is on a relatively conservative reading of the biblical text and a number of suppositions so independent that if one of them should prove false, the whole model would collapse" (Andrew H. Hedges, *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 9/1 (1997), 65, https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1325&context=msr). "In positing the Indians as a remnant of the lost tribes, for over 200 years, the churchmen never "at any time debate the possibility that the Indians' ancestors knew of Christ's birth before the event, had engaged in such New Testament practices as baptism in Old Testament times, and had been visited by Christ after his resurrection. This was because the mere suggestion of these things would have done violence to their understanding of the Bible, contemporary evidence from Indian cultures themselves, and other parts of the model" (ibid.).

43. Kevin Christensen, "Paradigms Regained: A Survey of Margaret Barker's Scholarship and Its Significance for Mormon Studies," *FARMS Occasional Papers* 2 (2001).

> conflict with the theory, and (2) another theory may be equally compatible with present evidence.[44]

> Discordant data *do not always falsify a theory.* One can never test an individual hypothesis conclusively in a "crucial experiment"; for if a deduction is not confirmed experimentally, one cannot be sure which one, from among the many assumptions on which the deduction was based, was in error. A network of theories and observations is always tested together. Any particular hypothesis can be maintained by rejecting or adjusting other auxiliary hypotheses.[45]

In proposing the notion of "ostentatious anachronism" (9), consider the network of assumptions involved in justifying such judgments. The Book of Mormon claims that it is an inspired translation and interpretation of ancient records. One of the meanings of *translate* from the 1828 Webster's dictionary is to "carry across." In latter-day revelation, the Lord describes how he gives commandments "unto my servants in their weakness, after the manner of their language, that they might come unto understanding" (D&C 1:24). So according to the believing account, we have a text with multiple authors and editors, the first of whom had access to more than what we have in the Hebrew Old Testament (1 Nephi 13:23–41); and some of whom report that at one point the resurrected Jesus takes a role not only as a provider of words (3 Nephi 11–28) but also in some respects as an editor of their records (3 Nephi 23:6–14). Finally the last editors/contributors report "I was visited of the Lord and I tasted and knew of the goodness of Jesus" (Mormon 1:15) and "that I have seen Jesus, and that he hath talked with me face to face" (Ether 12:39). So neither the Book of Mormon authors nor the editors nor the translator who gave us the version we have can be assumed to be participating in a double-blind test, isolated from any exposure to language and ideas that we find in the New Testament, or without access to important non-biblical writings that we do not have.

Indeed, regarding the translator, the King James New Testament language was an inescapable part of Joseph Smith's language and understanding. For that matter, the New Testament authors clearly had access to many writings discovered since Joseph Smith's time and many that have been lost to history. We don't know for sure what, if anything,

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44. Ian Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms: A Comparative Study of Science and Religion*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 98.

45. Ibid., 99.

was completely original to them.[46] For instance, the discovery of *1 Enoch* made it possible to identify over 100 places where Bible writers quote or allude to it, something difficult or impossible beforehand. Old Testament and New Testament authors and editors also interacted with texts, selecting, editing, and at times Targumizing. So the ways in which allegedly anachronistic New Testament language that disproves the Book of Mormon's claims to antiquity always rest on a network of significant relationships and multiple possibilities of sources, authors, editors, and the language and inspiration of the translator. The circumstance does not support a one-dimensional, simple assessment leading to an unassailable, dead-certain, once-and-for-all "gotcha!" Consider, for example, Robert F. Smith's exploration of the supposed Hamlet quote in the Book of Mormon[47] as well as my own response to David Wright's claims about the Melchizedek material.[48] Some *Americanist Approaches* authors mention the Isaiah problem, but, of course, I do not expect to find reference to or engagement with Latter-day Saint defenses of the presence of those chapters[49] or even Margaret Barker's case that Isaiah 53 was directly inspired by Hezekiah's bout with the plague which, conveniently for us, makes it preexilic and available to Abinadi.[50]

Of course, in *Americanist Approaches* and elsewhere, anyone has the perfect right to assume that even the appearance of anachronism is telling and conclusive *as far as they are concerned.* But that leaves us in a position to consider this:

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46.   See John W. Welch, *Illuminating the Sermon at the Temple & the Sermon on the Mount: An Approach to 3 Nephi 11-18 and Matthew 5-7* (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1999), especially Chapter 7, "The Common Israelite Background," showing "biblical antecedents and precedents drawn upon by Jesus in the Sermon" (153).

47.   Robert F. Smith, "Evaluating the Sources of 2 Nephi 1:13-15: Shakespeare and the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 22/2, 98-103, https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1526&context=jbms.

48.   Kevin Christensen, "The Deuteronomist De-Christianizing of the Old Testament," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 16/2 (2004), 59-90, https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1621&context=msr.

49.   I have a section on the topic in Christensen, "Paradigms Regained," called "Open Questions and Suggestions Regarding Isaiah in the Book of Mormon."

50. See Margaret Barker, "Hezekiah's Boil," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 26 (September 1, 2001), 31–42, https://doi.org/10.1177/030908920102600102. Also available as "The Original Setting of the Fourth Servant Song" (unpublished paper, 2000), http://www.margaretbarker.com/Papers/FourthServantSong.pdf.

> It makes a great deal of sense to ask which of two actual and competing theories fits the facts better.[51]

> Particularly persuasive arguments can be developed if the new paradigm permits the prediction of phenomena that had been entirely unsuspected while the old one prevailed.[52]

So when I read Fenton and Hickman's claim that 1 Nephi 1 is saddled with anachronisms, I have to consider, for instance, my own work in comparing Margaret Barker's Temple Theology with what I find there.[53] And having read the work of literally hundreds of authors who have explored the Book of Mormon from a variety of angles and areas of expertise, I have much to consider when I decide whose approach fits the facts better. For instance, Fenton's interesting essay, in passing, states this:

> The Mulekite's ancestral line, it turns out, traces back to nothing. Mulek does not exist in the Bible, and his descendants do not appear in the original prophesy of Nephite ascendance and decline. (291)

Back in 1992, observations by Robert Smith were published:

> Jeremiah 38:6 speaks of a "dungeon of Malchiah the son of Hammelech … in the court of the prison." But the Hebrew name here, *MalkiYahu ben-hamMelek*, should be translated "MalkiYahu, son of the king," the Hebrew word *melek* meaning "king."[54]

In 2003, Jeffery Chadwick produced a detailed article on the implications of a Judean stamp seal with the Hebrew form of the Biblical name.[55] So, contrary to Fenton's comment, Mulek apparently exists within the Bible as a son of Zedekiah. Learned though they are, these authors don't know all of the important information. None of us do. But a great deal of believing scholarship explores questions and evidence not addressed at all in *Americanist Approaches*.

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51. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 146.

52. Ibid., 153.

53. Kevin Christensen, "The Temple, The Monarchy, and Wisdom: Lehi's World and the Scholarship of Margaret Barker" in John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann H. Seely, eds., *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem* (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2004), 449–522.

54. John W. Welch, ed., *Reexploring the Book of Mormon: A Decade of New Research* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 143.

55. Jeffery R. Chadwick, "Has the Seal of Mulek Been Found?," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 12/2 (2003), 72–83, 117–18, https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1327&context=jbms.

On Colonialism and Postcolonialism
in Book of Mormon Studies

With the decline of empires in world history has come literature and thought assessing the tensions between the worldview of the colonizers and the self-image and voice of the colonized. Wikipedia has this:

> Postcolonialism encompasses a wide variety of approaches, and theoreticians may not always agree on a common set of definitions. On a simple level, it may seek through anthropological study to build a better understanding of colonial life from the point of view of the colonized people, based on the assumption that the colonial rulers are unreliable narrators.[56]

The notion of sitting down at a table and discussing our culture and founding texts with other scholars certainly has positive aspects even if, at times, some voices are uncomfortably critical and ideologically secular. Jesus emphasizes the importance of being self-critical before judging others, and it is worth reminding ourselves from time to time that *discerning* is another word for *critical*. Criticism precedes repentance, which is something we all must do. On the other hand, the notion of letting outsiders "colonize" our thinking carries with it the risk of letting others completely define who and what we are and how we see ourselves.

Commenting on wider manifestations of the same cultural issue, Toni Morrison has this:

> What I think the political correctness debate is really about is the power to be able to define. The definers want the power to name. And the defined are now taking that power away from them.[57]

For instance, one of the most telling characteristics of literature published about The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints by Evangelical Christians is that it largely amounts to boundary maintenance. It is not intended to describe us sympathetically, but to define us primarily by what most clearly, in their view, makes us "not them." Supposedly, universities and academia would be more universal

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56. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Postcolonialism
57. Claudia Dreifus, "Chloe Wofford Talks About Toni Morrison," *The New York Times Magazine* (September 11, 1994), 73, https://www.nytimes.com/1994/09/11/magazine/chloe-wofford-talks-about-toni-morrison.html. Think about this in relation to what Jesus has in mind when He asks us to take upon ourselves His name.

and tolerant. But Margaret Barker notes the reality in the relationship between the universities and the churches.

> There is a major crisis in biblical studies of which the churches seem unaware, and there is need for urgent action to ensure that at least in theological colleges something is taught that does not simply rely on university departments and replicate their syllabus and interests. Theological colleges and university departments now have very different agendas.[58]

> The agreement between church and academy, made a century earlier, had indeed been a Faustian pact. Prof. Philip Davies from Sheffield, who has a completely secular approach to Biblical studies, read a paper entitled 'Ownership? Responsibility? What is the Guild to do with the Bible?' He looked at the various disciplines which now have some sort of interest in biblical studies: cultural studies, literary theory, feminist issues, sociology and such like, and hailed this as a great liberation for biblical studies. When asked about the Church he was nonplussed. This implies that there is a need for university departments to make biblical studies relevant to all these latest trends in academe, and therefore, by implication, give it some sort of respectability, but no need to make it relevant to those who are the major users of the texts.[59]

Americanist Approaches certainly has its virtues, and the idea of doing similar things has an understandable appeal. But of course the desire to sit at tables like the one that produced *Americanist Approaches* is exactly what led to the 2012 change at the Maxwell Institute, a deliberate turn to serve the agenda of the universities at the expense of the "major users of the texts."[60]

So what are we to do? Keep our own tables occupied and productive so we have good resources for defending and extending our own self-definition. Keep our own tables occupied and busy producing resources relevant to the users of our texts. Keep busy so that when we consider what is produced at other tables, we have the means to ask

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58. Margaret Barker, "Reflections on Biblical Studies in the Twentieth Century" (paper presented to the Society of St. Alban and St. Sergius, 2000), 2, http://www.margaretbarker.com/Papers/ReflectionsOnBiblicalStudies.pdf.

59. Ibid., 4.

60. Though remember, too, that I have cited Sproat's important 2015 essay, which came after the changes at the Maxwell Institute.

"Which is better? Which problems are more significant to have solved?" And remember that what we ought to most urgently seek at our own table is the fruit of the tree of life. For that, it is very much worth enduring the occasional slog through darkness, and even the occasional pointing and mockery from the great and spacious building.

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