Telling the Story of the Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon

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Telling the Story of Faith

The Iranian-American author Reza Aslan, writing in *No god but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam*, made the point that religious apologetics need not necessarily be an overt systematic refutation of criticism. Responding to his critics, who have accused him of being a Muslim "apologist" (in the pejorative sense), Aslan wrote, "There are those who will call [*No god but God*] an apology [for Islam], but that is hardly a bad thing. An apology is a defense, and there is no higher calling than to defend one's faith, especially from ignorance and hate, and thus help shape the story of that faith."[1] Similar to

1 Reza Aslan, *No god but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam*, updated ed. (New York: Random House, 2011), xxvi.

Daniel C. Peterson's articulation of "positive apologetics,"[2] Aslan insists that there is room for relating the history of one's religious community in an informed, responsible, and uplifting manner. Indeed, if in so doing one is able to dispel common misunderstandings or diffuse ignorant or bigoted attacks on one's faith, all the better.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has long recognized the need to produce history that will tell the story of the Restoration in a way that counters the many hostile (and often irresponsible or misinformed) narratives and claims of its detractors. This impulse began early. When the Book of Mormon rolled off the press in 1830, Joseph Smith voiced his frustration at the "many false reports [that] have been circulated respecting the [Book of Mormon]," in addition to the "many unlawful measures taken by evil designing persons to destroy me, and also the work."[3] His preface to the Book of Mormon, in large part, was intended to quell the spurious rumors about the coming forth of the book that were already swirling in the upstate New York air. Despite his efforts, this early antagonism did not abate, and in his 1838 history the Prophet once again felt it necessary to preface the account of his early life and prophetic career with an apologetic emphasis. "Owing to the many reports which have been put in circulation by evil disposed and designing persons in relation to the rise and progress of the Church," Joseph informed his readers, "I have been induced to write this history so as to disabuse the publick mind, and put all enquirers after truth into possession of the facts as they have transpired in relation both to myself and the Church as far as I have such facts in possession."[4] Whatever else

2 "Positive apologetics seek to demonstrate that a given religious or ideological community's practices or beliefs are good, believable, true, and/or in some cases, superior to those of some other community. … In fact, knowing of the existence of competing doctrines that contradict its own teachings, representatives of a religious community might proceed to a positive apologetics, seeking to demonstrate that one or more of their claims are, in fact, very believable or even, perhaps, superior to rival views." Daniel C. Peterson, "The Role of Apologetics in Mormon Studies," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 2 (2012): xxxii–xxxiii. See also Daniel C. Peterson, "Editor's Introduction: An Unapologetic Apology for Apologetics," *FARMS Review* 22, no. 2 (2010): xxxiii–xxxv.

3 *The Book of Mormon: An Account Written by the Hand of Mormon, upon Plates Taken from the Plates of Nephi* (Palmyra, NY: Joseph Smith Jr., 1830), preface, online at http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/book-of-mormon-1830#!/paperSummary/book-of-mormon-1830&p=8.

4 "History, 1838–1856, volume A-1, [23 December 1805–30 August 1834]," 1, online at http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/history-1838-1856-volume-a-1-23-december-1805-30-august-1834.

Joseph's motives were in producing his history, clearly he had an apologetic interest in telling the story of the Restoration in a reliable manner.

Today the Church continues to recognize the need to produce accurate, responsible history that is faith-affirming and corrective to the hostile narratives or claims still being promulgated.

> Recognizing that today so much information about The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints can be obtained from questionable and often inaccurate sources, officials of the Church began in 2013 to publish straightforward, in-depth essays on a number of topics. The purpose of these essays, which have been approved by the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, has been to gather accurate information from many different sources and publications and place it in the Gospel Topics section of LDS.org, where the material can more easily be accessed and studied by Church members and other interested parties.[5]

So reads a statement prepared by the Church that prefaces the "Gospel Topics" essays that address sensitive issues in LDS history and theology. "The Church places great emphasis on knowledge and on the importance of being well informed about Church history, doctrine, and practices," the statement concludes. "Ongoing historical research, revisions of the Church's curriculum, and the use of new technologies allowing a more systematic and thorough study of scriptures have all been pursued by the Church to that end."[6] Far from wincing at the onslaught of criticism and skepticism found online and elsewhere, the Church is tackling the main issues raised by those with questions head-on by revamping its emphasis on producing the best historical scholarship possible.

From Darkness unto Light

From out of this historiographical renaissance has arisen a number of important books and articles touching on Church history and theology. Arguably the most impressive work on pre-1830 Mormon history to appear out of this milieu is Michael Hubbard MacKay and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat's 2015 volume *From Darkness unto Light: Joseph Smith's Translation and Publication of the Book of Mormon*.[7] This book, the product of "new

5 "Gospel Topics Essays," online at https://www.lds.org/topics/essays?lang=eng

6 "Gospel Topics Essays," online at https://www.lds.org/topics/essays?lang=eng

7 Michael Hubbard MacKay and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, *From Darkness unto Light: Joseph Smith's Translation and Publication of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT, and

knowledge [the authors] developed at the Joseph Smith Papers Project" (viii), seeks to tell the story of the early days of the Restoration in a way that lets the participants in those events (what Oliver Cowdery famously deemed "days never to be forgotten"[8]) practically speak for themselves. "Our book attempts to capture the first-person point of view of Joseph Smith and those who witnessed the translation and publication of the Book of Mormon," MacKay and Dirkmaat write. "Though we have taken into account the perspectives of detractors and nonbelievers in our analysis, the purpose of our book is to understand the coming forth of the Book of Mormon as a miracle, which can best be understood through the accounts of those closest to the process and by those who believed" (xv).

This is an entirely respectable historiographical track to take, all things considered. It was no less than Richard Bushman, Joseph Smith's premier biographer,[9] who observed that the near-thoroughgoing naturalism of some of the Prophet's commenters has hindered their (and our) understanding of early LDS history. "These everyday details [about the witnesses' involvement with the coming forth of the Book of Mormon] are besides the point for secular historians," Bushman remarked. "Most of the detailed sources were written by believers, and to follow them too closely infuses a narrative with their faith. Secular historians are, therefore, more inclined than Mormons to suppress source material from Joseph's closest associates."[10] The suppression of sources that do not comport to the assumptions that underlie one's reconstruction of the past would be wholly unacceptable in any other historical pursuit. Why is it, then, that naturalistic writers of early Mormonism or the life of Joseph Smith seem to get a pass on this? Whatever the answer, it is hard not to suspect that it has something to do with the ideological bias towards secularism and naturalism that has firmly planted itself

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Salt Lake City: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University and Deseret Book, 2015). All subsequent citations of this volume will be in parentheses in the body of this review.

8 Oliver Cowdery, "Letter I," *Messenger and Advocate* 1, no 1., October 1834, 11.

9 Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1984); *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005).

10 Richard Lyman Bushman, "The Recovery of the Book of Mormon," in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1997), 24.

in academia and has seeped into Mormon Studies itself (which, while unfortunate, is altogether not entirely surprising).[11]

MacKay and Dirkmaat inform us that "to Joseph Smith and his friends and family, the miraculous translation process was a reality" (xv). This may be uncomfortable to modern secular academicians or otherwise to those who may wish to allegorize away the foundational claims of the Prophet,[12] but it is an incontestable truth. There should thus be no shame in historiographically treating it as such or at the very least allowing some level of deference to the participants in this process to tell their own story. This is precisely what our authors do, straightforwardly reporting the testimony of those involved in the production of the Book of Mormon. To be sure, "no work of history nor any examination of sources that speak of heavenly manifestations and the visitations of angels can demonstrate the reality of these miraculous events." While it is true that "miracles are by definition events that cannot be replicated by mortal beings," and the coming forth of the Book of Mormon was and is believed by Latter-day Saints to be a miracle, this does not mean that one should shy away from telling the story as faithfully to the historical sources as one can (xvi). "What historians can demonstrate," MacKay and Dirkmaat clarify, "is how the witnesses to these events explained them, how they understood them, and how they came to believe … that Joseph Smith had been called by God to translate gold plates and publish that translation as the Book of Mormon" (xvi).

So how did Joseph Smith's early followers come to accept him as a seer? What was it about this miracle that inspired faith strong enough to lead people to follow the young prophet across half a continent and to social, political, and religious ostracism? Undoubtedly a major factor was that the coming forth of the Book of Mormon was grounded in the tangible, real-world, day-to-day experience of those involved. Joseph was not a mystic who mused on his ineffable encounter with the Divine. He was, rather, a farmhand who on the evening of September 21, 1827 brought home a set of plates and spectacles. Those who knew him the best believed his account of how he retrieved those artifacts. As MacKay and Dirkmaat meticulously document, there were many involved in this

11 John Gee, "Whither Mormon Studies?" *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 4 (2013): 93–130.

12 On the efforts of some to categorize the Book of Mormon as "inspired fiction," including a critique of such efforts, see Stephen O. Smoot, "The Imperative for a Historical Book of Mormon," online at http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/the-imperative-for-a-historical-book-of-mormon/.

recovery process, including Joseph's wife, his mother, father, siblings, close friends, relatives, and even hostile neighbors (1–24). So credible was Joseph's claim to have recovered a set of physical plates in the eyes of those who knew him that efforts were undertaken by some to steal them. The presumptions of modern skeptics who derogatorily look down on those of the past as superstitious simpletons notwithstanding, it must count for *something* that even Joseph's enemies took him seriously enough to try to pilfer the artifacts. "Compelling stories and news about the plates enveloped local Palmyra residents who heard about the stone box on the hill," MacKay and Dirkmaat explain (9). These reports spurred on Willard Chase, Lorenzo Saunders, and others to harass the Smith family to the point that Joseph and Emma fled to Harmony, Pennsylvania to seek respite (25–38).

It was while in Harmony, MacKay and Dirkmaat report, that the Prophet began his translation efforts in earnest. There he made copies of the characters on the plates for Martin Harris to take to the celebrated "wise men of the east" — Luther Bradish, Charles Anthon, and Samuel Mitchell — for their inspection (34–35, 39–59).[13] It was also in Harmony where Joseph began refining his ability as a translator, including becoming accustomed to the use of the Nephite interpreters and his own individual seer stone (61–78).[14] MacKay and Dirkmaat explain the history behind the seer stone Joseph used in translating the Book of Mormon, which has commanded considerable attention in the media as of late with the first-time publication of photographs of the stone in 2015.[15] They write:

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13 See Richard E. Bennett, "'Read This I Pray Thee': Martin Harris and the Three Wise Men of the East," *Journal of Mormon History* 36, no. 1 (Winter 2010): 178-216; "'A Nation Now Extinct,' American Indian Origin Theories as of 1820: Samuel L. Mitchill, Martin Harris, and the New York Theory," *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 20, no. 2 (2011): 30–51; "'A Very Particular Friend' — Luther Bradish," in *Approaching Antiquity: Joseph Smith and the Ancient World*, ed. Lincoln H. Blumell, Matthew J. Grey, and Andrew H. Hedges (Provo, UT and Salt Lake City: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University and Deseret Book, 2015), 63–82; "Martin Harris's 1828 Visit to Luther Bradish, Charles Anthon, and Samuel Mitchill," in *The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon: A Marvelous Work and a Wonder*, ed. Dennis L. Largey et al. (Provo, UT, and Salt Lake City: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University and Deseret Book, 2015), 103–115.

14 See Michael Hubbard MacKay, "'Git Them Translated': Translating the Characters on the Gold Plates," in *Approaching Antiquity*, 83–118.

15 See "Church History Department Releases Book of Mormon Printer's Manuscript in New Book," online at http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/church-history-department-releases-book-of-mormon-printer-s-manuscript-

> Joseph's possession of additional seer stones is generally not included in traditional LDS history, which focuses upon the use of the "Urim and Thummim." Some LDS histories and art typically depict Joseph with the spectacles as if they were the only device Joseph Smith used in the translation. Yet Church leaders and Church-sponsored histories have identified the fact that Joseph did not use just the spectacles. Recently, historians of the Joseph Smith Papers Project carefully analyzed all of the known accounts about the translation to document the use of the seer stone. It turns out that Joseph's seer stone was prepared by God, according to the Book of Mormon, and like the Nephite interpreters, was buried in the earth where Joseph would eventually find it. (67)

Contrary to the misinformed claims one might encounter on some parts of the Internet, there is no actual evidence for an institutional conspiracy on the part of the Church to suppress information about Joseph Smith's use of a seer stone in translating the Book of Mormon.[16] While it is true that traditional Latter-day Saint dramatic, artistic, and narrative depictions of the translation of the Book of Mormon have typically omitted the seer stone, as Anthony Sweat explains in the book's appendix, this can more plausibly be explained as the result of artistic license, lack of knowledge, or innocent neglect rather than an intent to deliberately deceive. (More on this later.) In any event, *From Darkness unto Light* chronicles the Prophet's use of the seer stone as well as other translation instruments and explores implications such hold for understanding the production of the Book of Mormon (67–71, 123–130).

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in-new-book; Richard E. Turley, Jr., Robin S. Jensen, and Mark Ashurst-McGee, "Joseph the Seer," *Ensign*, October 2015, 49–55, online at http://media.ldscdn.org/pdf/magazines/ensign-october-2015/2015-10-18-joseph-the-seer-eng.pdf. Full color photos of Joseph's seer stone, as well as the history of its use in the translation of the Book of Mormon and its acquisition by the Church, are also accessible in Royal Skousen and Robin Scott Jensen, eds., *Revelations and Translations, Volume 3, Part 1: Printer's Manuscript of the Book of Mormon, 1 Nephi 1–Alma 35* (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2015), xvii–xxv, photos at xx–xxi.

16 See for instance "Mormonism and history/Censorship and revision/Hiding the facts," online at http://en.fairmormon.org/Mormonism_and_history/Censorship_and_revision/Hiding_the_facts#The_seer_stone_and.2For_the_stone_with_the_hat; Roger Nicholson, "The Spectacles, the Stone, the Hat, and the Book: A Twenty-first Century Believer's View of the Book of Mormon Translation," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 5 (2013): 121–190.

The second third of *From Darkness unto Light* concerns itself with such incidents as the translation and loss of the Book of Lehi (79–04), the return to Palmyra and the enlisting of Oliver Cowdery as a scribe (105–139), and the experience of the Three and Eight Witnesses (141–161). Concerning the latter, MacKay and Dirkmaat convincingly argue that the experience of multiple witnesses firmly establishes the historicity of the plates. Whether the plates were ancient artifacts or modern forgeries can be debated, but what cannot seriously be debated on historical grounds is their existence and Joseph Smith's possession of them between the years 1827 and 1830. The accounts of those who handled the plates in some way are reliable and consistent enough that we're actually able to fairly easily reconstruct their physical dimensions. MacKay and Dirkmaat, piecing together the eyewitness testimony, summarize:

> From the accounts of the Three and Eight Witnesses, along with those given by others who interacted in some way with the plates, a fairly complete description of them can be made. They apparently weighed somewhere between forty and sixty pounds. The shape of the plates was reported as being between six and seven inches wide and around eight inches long. They were also four to six inches thick, with two-thirds of the plates being sealed, most likely by one solid piece of metal that covered the whole two-thirds of the plates. The plates that were not bound together were apparently "thin leaves of gold" about the thickness of tin or "about as thick as parchment." Both the sealed portion and the loose-leaf portion were bound together by three rings in the shape of a capital *D*. (154, internal citations removed)

So compelling, in fact, is the historicity of the plates that Joseph Smith's critics have been forced to invent *ad hoc* rationalizations for their existence that involve, for example, the Prophet (or perhaps some unknown assailants) forging a set of bogus plates. Fawn Brodie dismissed the experience of the Three Witnesses as a hallucinatory vision "conjured up" by the Prophet but was forced to reluctantly concede that "perhaps Joseph built some kind of makeshift deception" to fool the Eight Witnesses and others.[17] Dan Vogel likewise has brushed aside

17 Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945), 78, 80.

the experience of the Three Witnesses as more or less hallucinatory[18] but has gone so far as to speculate how Joseph could have fabricated a set of tin plates to satisfy the unequivocal testimony of those who handled the artifacts.[19] This explanation, ingenious though it may be, is of course highly debatable — it is nothing more than a hypothesis developed to meet the *a priori* demands of a naturalistic worldview.[20] Regardless, what's significant for our purposes here is that the historical evidence is so compelling for the existence of actual, physical plates in Joseph Smith's possession that even his skeptics are forced to account for their existence in some manner. This much is therefore clear: one cannot

18 Dan Vogel, *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2004), 441–450.

19 See Dan Vogel, "Joseph Smith Brings the Plates Home – Dan Vogel," online at https://youtu.be/mmX-H1GBivk (27:00–31:13). Vogel has elsewhere waffled on the experience of the Eight Witnesses being visionary or not, suggesting the possibility that it was an experience that combined visionary and non-visionary elements. See Dan Vogel, "The Validity of the Witnesses' Testimonies," in *American Apocrypha: Essays on the Book of Mormon*, ed. Dan Vogel and Brent Lee Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 99–105. Vogel, *American Apocrypha*, 108, also suggests "it would have been possible for [Joseph Smith] to make plates out of tin — which would be consistent with the reported weight of between forty and sixty pounds — and allow the chosen few to feel them through a cloth." Vogel's reluctance to fully commit to one or the other (hallucinatory vs. physical but fabricated) may serve as a clever debating trick (heads Vogel wins; tails the apologists lose), but it isn't very convincing. Against a mountain of historical evidence, at least one other popular anti-Mormon author still holds out to the possibility that the Eight Witnesses simply hallucinated their experience. See Grant H. Palmer, *An Insider's View of Mormon Origins* (Salt Lake City,: Signature Books, 2002), 205–207. For a response to Vogel and Palmer, see Steven C. Harper, "Evaluating the Book of Mormon Witnesses," *Religious Educator* 11, no. 2 (2010): 37–49.

20 See generally Steven C. Harper, "The Eleven Witnesses," in *The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon,* 117–132; Amy Easton-Flake and Rachel Cope, "A Multiplicity of Witnesses: Women and the Translation Process," in *The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon*, 133–153; Royal Skousen, "Another Account of Mary Whitmer's Viewing of the Golden Plates," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 10 (2014): 35–44; Gale Yancey Anderson, "Eleven Witnesses Behold the Plates," *Journal of Mormon History* 38, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 145-162; John W. Welch, "The Miraculous Translation of the Book of Mormon," in *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations*, ed. John W. Welch with Erick B. Carlson (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and BYU Press, 2005), 77–117; Richard Lloyd Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981); "Attempts to Redefine the Experience of the Eight Witnesses," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 14, no. 1 (2005): 18–31, 125–27.

simply dismiss the physicality of the plates without doing gross violence to responsible historiography.

The final part of *From Darkness unto Light* touches on the publication of the Book of Mormon, including the details behind Joseph's attempt to secure a copyright and printer for the text. There are many deeply interesting insights provided by MacKay and Dirkmaat in this part of the book as well as insights that correct previous misunderstanding. For instance, with the work of the Joseph Smith Papers Project, as reported in the book, the dating of Doctrine and Covenants 19 has been pushed back from 1830 to circa August 1829 (190–193). So compelling is the evidence for re-dating this revelation that it has been "changed in the newest edition of the scriptures" (193). Similarly, the details of the once-enigmatic Canadian copyright revelation have emerged thanks largely to the efforts of the Joseph Smith Papers Project (213–215). Far from being a "failed prophecy," as David Whitmer (mis)remembered,[21] "the revelation hinged the success of the mission to Canada on the righteousness of those they would encounter there" (214). As explained further by Marlin K. Jensen, "Although we still do not know the whole story, particularly Joseph Smith's own view of the situation, we do know that calling the divine communication a 'failed revelation' is not warranted. The Lord's directive clearly conditions the successful sale of the copyright on the worthiness of those seeking to make the sale as well as on the spiritual receptivity of the potential purchasers."[22]

But perhaps the most fascinating insight to be found in this section of the book is the discussion of Jonathan A. Hadley's 1829 account of his visit with Joseph Smith. Printer of the *Palmyra Freeman*, Hadley reported in August 1829 that the Prophet had recently come to him seeking to contract the publication of the Book of Mormon. Although he contemptuously dismissed his account of the recovery of the plates, Hadley nevertheless reported Joseph's description to him of the physical dimensions thereof. "The leaves of the Bible were plates of gold, about eight inches long, six wide, and one eighth of an inch thick, on which were engraved characters or hieroglyphics," Hadley conveyed. He likewise

21 David Whitmer, *An Address to All Believers in Christ by a Witness to the Divine Authenticity of The Book of Mormon* (Richmond, VA: David Whitmer, 1887), 30–31.

22 Marlin K. Jensen, "The Joseph Smith Papers: The Manuscript Revelation Books," *Ensign*, July 2009, 51, online at http://media.ldscdn.org/pdf/magazines/ensign-july-2009/2009-07-14-the-joseph-smith-papers-the-manuscript-revelation-books-eng.pdf.

reported one of the earliest accounts of the translation method of the Book of Mormon, again as it was related to him by Joseph Smith: "By placing the Spectacles in a hat, and looking into it, Smith could (he said so, at least,) interpret these characters." Hadley's early report is "almost identical" in these two regards to the accounts left by participants in later years, thus reinforcing the overall credibility of the eyewitnesses who were associated with Joseph in the production of the Book of Mormon (167–168).[23]

By the Gift and Power of Art

Finally, it is worth highlighting the appendix written by Anthony Sweat, assistant professor of Church history and doctrine at Brigham Young University and a "part-time professionally trained artist" (229). Titled "By the Gift and Power of Art," this appendix explains, among other things, how Sweat came to blend his historical and artistic training to produce his 2014 painting *By the Gift and Power of God* (Figure 1). Sweat begins by explaining the inherent difficulty in balancing historical accuracy and artistic imagination. "True art and true history rarely, if ever, fully combine," he writes. This difficulty is often inescapable because "the aims of history and the aims of art are not aligned, often pulling in entirely different directions" (229–230).

This discord, however, is rarely, if ever, because of a deliberate attempt by an artist to "deceive" those viewing historical artwork. It is rather because the "the two disciplines speak different native languages." What Sweat calls "the language of history" involves "facts and sources," whereas "the language of art" is composed of "symbolic representations in line, value, color, texture, form, space, shape, and so forth" (230). Sweat uses Emanuel Leutze's famous painting *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (Figure 2) to illustrate this. In almost every particular, Leutze's painting is historically inaccurate. "However, artists often have little to no intent of communicating historical factuality when they produce a work. Artists want to communicate an idea, and they want to use whatever medium or principle and element of art that it takes to communicate that idea to their viewers" (231). This is perhaps why nobody particularly cares that Leutze's piece is historically inaccurate; it still hangs proudly in many government buildings, schools, museums, and private homes without anyone batting an eye.

23 See also the discussion in Gerrit J. Dirkmaat and Michael Hubbard MacKay, "Joseph Smith's Negotiations to Publish the Book of Mormon," in *The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon*, 155–171.

Figure 1. Anthony Sweat, *By the Gift and Power of God* (2014), online at http://www.archive.bookofmormoncentral.org/content/gift-and-power-god. Used with permission.

Sweat relates this to Latter-day Saint artistic depictions of the translation of the Book of Mormon. It is true that Mormon artists, including those commissioned to produce artwork for Church publications, have traditionally avoided depicting Joseph translating with the seer stone. What is far less likely to be true is that this was motivated by deception. "It is easy for critics to assume a coordinate cover-up or historical rewrite when looking at the images," Sweat acknowledges, "but the unjuicy reality may have more to do with a preference for speaking artistic language that is 'truer' in its communication, even if the depicted events contain historical error" (237). As it turns out, the Church actually did try to commission artwork from Walter Rane depicting the translation of the Book of Mormon with the seer stone. However, Rane explained that he wasn't able to capture the right aesthetic or artistic feel, and the project fell flat (236).

Similarly, Sweat himself reports that when he first tried rendering an artistic depiction of the translation that conformed to historical reality, his viewers were confused and thought Joseph looking into the hat was him actually vomiting. "It didn't communicate anything about inspiration, visions, revelations, miracles, translations, or the like — just stomach sickness" (237). The point to all of this is to say the angst that many feel over inaccuracies in Church-commissioned artwork is largely misplaced. There does not appear to be any intention to deceive people, and anyone aware of the how art functions knows that historical accuracy is not typically at the top of an artist's aesthetic agenda. As such, members of the Church and others should enjoy Church artwork for what it is and not be upset when an artist does not meet all of our (sometimes unreasonable) expectations.

Figure 2. Emanuel Leutze, *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (1851), online at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Washington_Crossing_the_Delaware. Public Domain.

Conclusion

I cannot recommend *From Darkness unto Light* highly enough. It is absolutely essential reading for anyone interested in early LDS history and the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. MacKay and Dirkmaat have accomplished a prodigious feat of scholarship with this volume, which is a respectable model for all future stand-alone monographs that may evolve out of the work being done by the Joseph Smith Papers Project or the Church History Department. With their book MacKay and Dirkmaat have told the story of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon in a way that is testimony-strengthening, intellectually exciting, and historically responsible.

As I have thought more about this book, my mind has been called up to reflection on two points. First, it is remarkable how well Joseph Smith's account of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon holds up under scrutiny. I frequently hear the claim that Joseph Smith was some kind of fool for starting a religion in the modern era. Whereas the origins of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam are largely lost to the realm of the quasi-mythic past, so I've heard, Joseph Smith was audaciously foolish to found a religious movement in the era of the printing press, where historians and other scholars could easily fact-check his claims. The default assumption for the Prophet's skeptical critics, of course, is that

modern scholarship has largely exploded Joseph's outlandish claims or has otherwise cast an indelible shadow of suspicion over his credibility.

Nothing could be further from the truth. The sort of work accomplished by MacKay and Dirkmaat (and they are by no means alone) highlights how almost airtight the evidence is for the chronology of the early Restoration. The best and strongest historical evidence supports the claims of Joseph Smith concerning the Book of Mormon: that in September 1827 he returned home one evening with a set of physical metal plates found at a nearby hill; that he recovered those plates and showed them to others, who not only testified to having encounters with a divine being, but also incessantly testified of the plates' tangibility; that he claimed these plates were delivered to him by an angel of God and that he translated them by the gift and power of God; that he dictated without notes or manuscript a book of nearly six hundred printed pages in one go and with practically no revisions in about sixty working days; and that this dictated manuscript was then copied line by line and printed in roughly six months. However one accounts for this, one must acknowledge that the most compelling historical evidence clearly indicates this was what happened between the years 1827 and 1830, precisely as Joseph Smith claimed. We can therefore confidently assert that as our knowledge of early Mormon history increases, there is an increasingly shrinking gap in the historical timeline for skeptics to fit contrived conspiracies and *ad hoc* secular explanations into the picture.[24]

The second point is related to the first, and has to do with what I have come to perceive is a near-fatal weakness in the hermeneutic of suspicion when it comes to Joseph Smith. From a historiographical perspective, skeptics of Joseph Smith who wish to dismiss the Prophet's claims out of hand must scale a much more difficult mountain than they have perhaps supposed. For they not only have to dismiss the testimony of Joseph Smith but must also dismiss the testimony of his wife Emma and the rest of the Smith family, Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer and the rest of the Whitmer family, Martin Harris, Joseph Knight, Josiah Stowell, and many others in order to maintain the hermeneutic. And this is to say nothing about the manuscript and textual-critical evidence

24 For more thoughts along these lines, see also Daniel C. Peterson, "Editor's Introduction: Not So Easily Dismissed: Some Facts for Which Counterexplanations of the Book of Mormon Will Need to Account," *FARMS Review* 17, no. 2 (2005): xi–xlix

that has been convincingly marshalled by Royal Skousen in support of Joseph Smith's claims.[25]

But in what is something of a historiographical Catch-22, if they do wish to dismiss the multitude of these accounts, skeptics are left with practically nothing to reliably reconstruct the pre-1830 history of Joseph Smith. After all, who can seriously argue that the firsthand eyewitness testimony of those directly involved in the production of the Book of Mormon should take a backseat to the often dodgy and contradictory hearsay offered by non-eyewitnesses?[26] Were it any other historical event, say the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776 or the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophie in 1914, such a suggestion would be unthinkable. And yet, most likely because it involves miraculous elements that clash with the reigning secular worldview of today's academia, this double standard is liberally applied by many writers when it comes to the history behind the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. That being so, as Steven C. Harper argues, one is free to ignore the strongest historical evidence for the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, but one must do so at one's own historiographical risk:

> When it comes to the Book of Mormon witnesses, the question is which historical documents is one willing to trust? Those whose faith has been deeply shaken sometimes find it easier to trust lesser evidence rather than the best sources or the overwhelming preponderance of the evidence. But that choice is not a foregone conclusion. It is neither inevitable nor irreversible. … Why not opt to believe in the direct statements of the witnesses and their demonstrably lifelong commitments to the Book of Mormon? This choice asks us to have faith in the marvelous, the possibility of angels, spiritual eyes, miraculous translation, and gold plates, but it does not require us to discount the historical record or create hypothetical ways to reconcile the compelling Book of Mormon witnesses with our own skepticism.[27]

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25 For a summary of Skousen's work, including links to access his scholarship, see "Are There Mistakes In The Book Of Mormon?" online at http://www.knowhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/content/are-there-mistakes-book-mormon.

26 See Michael Hubbard MacKay and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, "Firsthand Witness Accounts of the Translation Process," in *The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon*, 61–79.

27 Steven C. Harper, "The Eleven Witnesses," 128–129.

Ultimately, belief or disbelief in Joseph Smith's claims will come down to a matter of subjective choice after one has personally weighed and evaluated the strengths and weaknesses of the competing paradigms. There is no single, definitive, knockout argument in either direction. That being said, those who default to skepticism must be intellectually honest enough to admit that their skepticism does not derive solely, or evenly mostly, from objective historical analysis. For if the outstanding scholarship of MacKay and Dirkmaat in *From Darkness unto Light* has proven anything, it's that the story of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon is arguably best told and understood from a hermeneutic of trust and a position of faith.

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