

# Just How “Scandalous” is the Golden Plates Story? Academic Discourse on the Origin of the Book of Mormon



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There has been much talk among historians of Mormonism about avoiding the “prophet or fraud” polemic surrounding Joseph Smith. But avoiding that polemic is easier said than done. Had Smith confined his claims to visions and revelations, it would have been simpler for “faithful” LDS scholars<sup>1</sup> and others to develop a common discourse predicated on agreement that Smith sincerely believed he had seen angels and written texts under inspiration. Matters are complicated, however, by Smith’s claim to have possessed golden plates which others claimed to have *handled*. As Terry L. Givens has observed, the claim to tangibility presses us out of “the realms of interiority and subjectivity.”<sup>2</sup> When witnesses report having hefted something heavy concealed in a box or under cloth, it becomes hard for scholars unconverted to Mormon orthodoxy to avoid the suspicion that, in Richard Bushman’s words, “something fishy was going on.”<sup>3</sup> The plates are thus a potential “scandal” in the sense of the Greek skandalon: a stumbling block to conversation about Mormonism across the religious divide and hence to the mainstreaming of Mormon studies.

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<sup>1</sup> “Faithful scholars” refers to LDS academics who work on Mormon topics from a perspective that assumes the objective historical truth of LDS faith claims, notably that the Book of Mormon is a translation of an ancient document. Most of the scholars working in this vein are housed at BYU, with prominent exceptions like Richard Bushman and Terry L. Givens; many have been associated with FARMS, the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute, or BYU’s religion department. I dislike the way the terms “faithful scholarship” and “faithful perspective” normalize LDS orthodoxy (i.e., by implying that Mormons who don’t believe in the historicity of the Book of Mormon are not “faithful”). Elsewhere I have employed the term “orthodox scholarship” instead. John Charles Duffy, “Defending the Kingdom, Rethinking the Faith: How Apologetics Is Reshaping Mormon Orthodoxy,” *Sunstone*, May 2004, 22-55. Nevertheless, I speak in this study of “faithful scholarship” given that this is a preferred form of self-identification for the scholars whose work I am analyzing.

<sup>2</sup> Terry L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 12.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Lyman Bushman, *Believing History: Latter-day Saint Essays*, ed. Reid L. Neilson and Jed Woodworth (New York: Columbia University Press), 269.

Despite this problem, a number of faithful scholars appear confident of their ability to credibly voice orthodox claims about the Book of Mormon in non-Mormon academic venues. Brigham Young University faculty members John Tvedtnes and Noel Reynolds offer anecdotal evidence that non-Mormon academics are coming to seriously consider LDS scholarship on the Book of Mormon and even to be convinced of the book’s antiquity or Hebrew provenance.<sup>4</sup> Reynolds believes that “we are nearing the point when it might be acceptable for non-LDS academic presses to publish academic books on Book of Mormon topics that would be written from a faithful perspective.”<sup>5</sup> Grant Underwood, speaking at the May 2005 symposium on Joseph Smith at the Library of Congress, opined that while it is “beyond the methods and focus of the academy” to legitimize Smith’s claims to be God’s spokesman, “scholars do not rule out the possibility.”<sup>6</sup>

Are these assessments accurate? How open is the non-Mormon academy to “faithful” Mormon perspectives? What is the current political climate in academia vis-à-vis the credibility of orthodox accounts of the Book of Mormon? Is it possible to speak of the book in academic settings as a bona fide translation of an ancient record written on golden plates without creating scandal? To use a different metaphor: How must the golden plates be “handled” in academic discourse?

### About This Study

To answer these questions, I will analyze how Smith’s production of the Book of Mormon (the golden plates, the visitations by Moroni, the miraculous translation, and so on) has been narrated in academic texts published outside the Mormon world. The goal of the analysis is to identify the discourse conventions that delimit what can be credibly said about the Book of Mormon’s provenance in academic settings at this period of time. My

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<sup>4</sup> Tvedtnes claims to have met a non-Mormon academic who “acknowledged the Book of Mormon as an authentic ancient text” and another who was “very open to the idea that the Book of Mormon was translated from an ancient Hebrew text.” Reynolds cites a letter sent by an Oxford professor who says that a conference organized at BYUNIVERSITY showed him that the Book of Mormon is a “complex and inspiring work” which bears “close analysis.” Reynolds presents this letter as evidence that “non-LDS scholars are ... willing to take a more serious look at the Book of Mormon in light of LDS scholarship.” John A. Tvedtnes, “Hebrew Names in the Book of Mormon,” paper presented at the Thirteenth World Congress of Jewish Studies, Jerusalem, August 2001; online at <http://www.fairlds.org/pubs/HebrewNames.pdf>; Noel B. Reynolds, “The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon in the Twentieth Century,” *BYUNIVERSITY Studies* 38, no. 2 (1999): 38-40.

<sup>5</sup> “FARMS through the Years, Part 2: A Conversation with Stephen D. Ricks and Noel B. Reynolds,” *Insights*, December 1999, 6.

<sup>6</sup> To support this claim, Underwood cites George Marsden, a Calvinist historian who has argued that the academy unfairly excludes Christian perspectives. A video file of Underwood’s remarks can be accessed at <http://www.lds.org/library/display/0,4945,510-1-3067-1,00.html>.

analysis assumes that academic credibility is a function of the rhetorical, ergo social, forces at work in academic discourse communities. When scholars write, they do so in ways calculated to deflect criticism from individuals or groups whom they imagine to constitute their audience. Through close reading, we can infer the rhetorical pressures that shape scholars’ writing about Book of Mormon origins and thus can identify prevailing understandings of the limits of credible academic discourse on this subject. Different understandings about what is appropriate to academic discourse, or what counts as credible scholarship, may compete or coexist within a given community of scholars, creating situations that may either hinder or facilitate faithful scholarship’s entrance into the academic mainstream.

For my analysis, I have created a pool of fifty academic texts published outside the Mormon world over the last quarter century that summarize Smith’s claims about the coming forth of the Book of Mormon (see appendix). While I do not claim that my pool is exhaustive, I have cast my net broadly enough that I am confident in drawing conclusions about trends in academic discourse.<sup>7</sup> Because I define academic discourse by audience, I have excluded from the pool works from major publishing houses such as Knopf or Viking, even if the authors of those works had academic credentials such as faculty positions at institutions of higher education.<sup>8</sup> “Academic” texts, as I define them for this study, come from journals associated with universities or widely recognized professional associations or from presses that primarily market themselves as serving academic audiences.<sup>9</sup> Because I am interested in how the Book of Mormon’s provenance

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<sup>7</sup> For a list of the fifty texts in my pool, see the appendix. Creating the pool was a multi-stage process. First I drew samples from texts which I already knew fit the parameters of my study. Second, I identified additional candidates for inclusion in the pool by searching the online catalogue at my university library using the subject keywords “Book of Mormon” and “Joseph Smith.” I then ran those same keyword searches in three databases: the ATLA Religion Database, the MLA Bibliography, and Web of Knowledge, which includes Science Citation Index Expanded, Social Sciences Citation Index, and the Arts & Humanities Citation Index. Finally, I sifted through the candidate texts generated by these searches to determine which ones would meet all of my criteria

<sup>8</sup> Hence my pool does not include works like Leonard Arrington and Davis Bitton’s *The Mormon Experience* (New York: Knopf, 1979), Fawn Brodie’s *No Man Knows My History*, 2nd. ed. (New York: Knopf, 1995), or Robert Remini’s *Joseph Smith* (New York: Viking, 2002).

<sup>9</sup> By “widely recognized professional associations” I have in mind entities such as the American Psychological Association. I decided to treat some state historical societies as “professional associations,” and therefore included items from their journals in my pool, but I did so with reservation since in these societies the boundary between academic and lay intellectual audiences can be highly permeable. (I will discuss a complication created by this decision in the section of my analysis on openly deprecatory rhetoric, below.) By “presses that primarily market themselves as serving academic audiences,” I mean University Presses chiefly, though the definition also encompasses certain non-University Presses like Ashgate and Sussex Academic Press. I did not include in my pool books from overtly religious presses or articles from theological journals, given that theology’s status as an “academic” endeavor is contested.

is discussed before principally non-Mormon audiences, I have not included publications from BYU, FARMS, Signature Books, Sunstone, Dialogue, the Mormon History Association, and the like, unless these were republished outside the Mormon world.

Of the fifty texts in my pool, 16 were written by authors who identify as believing or practicing LDS; 8 by authors who are disaffiliated from the LDS Church or plainly heterodox; 5 by authors with Community of Christ (RLDS) backgrounds, and 21 by authors without any known Mormon background.<sup>10</sup> A text’s summary of the Book of Mormon’s coming forth may range in length from a single sentence to an entire chapter.

## Handling Smith’s Claims: Rhetorical Strategies

I have organized authors’ treatments of Book of Mormon provenance under several headings. These headings can be thought of as a range of rhetorical strategies for “handling” Smith’s claims: open deprecation, disclaiming the truth question, naturalistic explanations, implicit skepticism, distancing devices, and factual language. An author may use more than one strategy in the same text.

### Open Deprecation

In their introduction to *Believing History*, Richard Bushman’s collected essays, Reid Nelson and Jed Woodworth speak of unnamed “secular historians” who, “eager to pronounce the [Book of Mormon] fraudulent, ... wave off the book with surface references to warmed-over King James English or theology resembling Smith’s environment.”<sup>11</sup> In fact, if my sample is reliable, an overtly deprecatory attitude toward Mormon beliefs is rare in academic publication. In my pool, only three, maybe four, texts display such an attitude. Kevin Garvey writes of an “eerie similarity” between Mormonism and

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<sup>10</sup> An author’s placement in one of these four categories reflects what I know about his or her religious status at the time the text I am analyzing was written. A list of the authors in each category follows. If the number of authors listed in a category does not match the number of texts given above, that means the pool contains more than one text by the same author. **Believing/practicing LDS:** Leonard Arrington, Philip Barlow, Richard Bushman, Craig Campbell, Kathryn Daynes, Eric Eliason, Terryl Givens, Grant Hardy, Kent Jackson, John Lundquist, Dean May, Richard Turley, Grant Underwood, Michael Van Wagenen. **Disaffiliated/heterodox LDS:** Newell Bringhurst, Clyde Forsberg, Klaus Hansen, Floyd O’Neill, Richard Ouellette, Gordon Shepherd. **RLDS/Community of Christ background:** Reed Holmes, Roger Launius, G. St. John Stott, William Morain. **No known Mormon background:** Dan Blazer, T. L. Brink, John Brooke, William Cullen Bryant II, Douglas Davies, R. Tripp Evans, Lawrence Foster, Kevin Garvey, Sarah Barringer Gordon, Paul Gutjahr, Nathan Hatch, David Holmes, Richard Hughes, Mark Leone, Colleen McDannell & Bernhard Lang (co-authors), Viola Sachs, Jan Shipps, Rodney Stark & Roger Finke (co-authors), Stephen Williams, Timothy Wood.

<sup>11</sup> Reid L. Nelson and Jed Woodworth, “Introduction,” in Bushman, *Believing History*, xiv.

Jonestown; William Cullen Bryant II paints Smith as a “self-declared seer” who “beguiled” his followers and relied on a “dreaded secret police to enforce his dicta”; Viola Sachs alludes to Smith’s “mystic delusion”; and T. L. Brink speaks of Smith’s “literary fantasies.”<sup>12</sup> Brink’s phrasing, however, is not so obviously pejorative in tone as the other texts cited (he could be using “fantasies” in a technical psychological sense). To complicate matters further, two of these texts — Garvey’s and Bryant’s — come from sources whose academic status is debatable even given the criteria I set out for my study. I included these two texts in the pool only to give them the benefit of the doubt.<sup>13</sup>

It appears, then, that academic discourse on the Book of Mormon rarely serves as a forum for writers “eager to pronounce the [book] fraudulent.” As we will see, academia is open to naturalistic explanations for the book, which Mormons of an orthodox bent might see as inherently deprecatory by the dualistic logic that to deny Smith’s prophetic claims are literally true is *ipso facto* to brand him either deluded or a fraud.<sup>14</sup> But in fact, most proponents of naturalistic accounts refrain from applying pejorative labels to Smith such as “deluded” or “fraudulent,” at least in their academic publications.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Garvey, “Prophet from Palmyra,” 60; Bryant, review, 442; Sachs, “Holy Scriptures,” 52; Brink, review, 273. Full bibliographic information for these texts, as for all the texts in my pool for analysis, can be found in the appendix.

<sup>13</sup> Garvey’s essay appeared as part of a book published by John Wright PSG. This apparently defunct press produced medical and scientific texts and therefore might qualify as a non-University Press serving primarily academic audiences — if one considers medical and scientific professionals to constitute academic audiences (a debatable proposition to which I am open but which is debatable since many practitioners are not housed at academic institutions). However, while most contributors to this book have credentials in psychiatry, Garvey is described merely as a “writer” and “journalist.” This fact strongly suggests that even if the press qualifies as academic, Garvey himself lacks academic credentials. Bryant’s review appears in *New York History*, a journal produced by the New York State Historical Association. As I explain in footnote 9, I accepted state historical associations as “professional associations,” and therefore their journals as representing academic discourse, only with reservation, since their audiences are likely to encompass both academics and non-academics. I know that Bryant served as chair of a language center at Columbia and edited the collected letters of his famous namesake for Fordham University Press, but I have not been able to ascertain if he had what could be regarded as academic credentials, strictly speaking (e.g., a professorship).

<sup>14</sup> Jeffrey R. Holland invokes this dualistic logic when he insists, “Either the Book of Mormon is what the Prophet Joseph said it is or this Church and its founder are false, fraudulent, a deception from the first instance onward.” Holland, “True or False,” *New Era*, June 1995, 64. Louis Midgley translates orthodox dualism into a scholarly vernacular: see, for instance, his “No Middle Ground: The Debate over the Authenticity of the Book of Mormon,” in *Historicity and the Latter-day Saint Scriptures*, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson (Provo: BYU UNIVERSITY Religious Studies Center, 2001), 149-70.

<sup>15</sup> I have seen scholars use more deprecatory language when writing for less strictly academic audiences. In another paper that analyzed responses to John Brooke’s *Refiner’s Fire*, I cited statements from non-Mormon scholars such as Martin Marty and Paul Johnson, who characterized Smith’s claims as “self-



## Disclaiming the Truth Question

A number of authors disclaim interest in the truthfulness of Smith's claims. A few do this on the grounds that the question is irrelevant to their particular project.<sup>16</sup> Others make a more sweeping assertion that the truth question is unimportant or inappropriate for the purposes of their discipline or for academic inquiry generally.<sup>17</sup> Douglas Davies goes so far as to maintain that the question is one of "personal belief" and thus entirely unsusceptible to being proven or disproven on a "historical or textual basis."<sup>18</sup>

Statements like this may betoken irenic intentions. This is clearly the case for Stephen Williams, author of *Fantastic Archaeology*, who confesses his skepticism about Mormon beliefs but aspires to treat them with respect.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Jan Shipp's refusal to take a position on Book of Mormon provenance is doubtless, at least in part, an exercise in diplomacy for the sake of her relationships with Mormon colleagues and friends.<sup>20</sup> But disclaiming the truth question is not necessarily an effort to strike a neutral pose. Viola Sachs, whom I cited above about Smith's "mystic delusion," uses that pejorative language in the very same sentence in which she explains that she does not intend to discuss the nature of Smith's experiences: "I do not intend to discuss the nature of this mystic delusion: what matters is that this could only have happened in the cultural context of a

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delusion, other-delusion, folly, and even chicanery," or as "one of the strangest stories in the strange history of American religion." John-Charles Duffy, "Clyde Forsberg's *Equal Rites* and the Exoticizing of Mormonism," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, forthcoming. Those statements appeared in publications (*Commonweal*, *The New Republic*) that do not meet the stricter definition of "academic" I am using in this study to draw conclusions about academic discourse conventions.

<sup>16</sup> Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, 297 n. 15; Sachs, "Holy Scriptures;" 52; Wood, "Prophet and the Presidency," 169; Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*, Author's Note (no page number); Campbell, *Images of the New Jerusalem*, 29.

<sup>17</sup> Hansen, *Mormonism and the American Experience*, 27; Shipp, *Mormonism*, 39; Brink, review, 273; Shepherd, review of *Trouble Enough*, 268.

<sup>18</sup> Davies, *Introduction to Mormonism*, 60.

<sup>19</sup> The purpose of Williams's book is to expose archaeological frauds. However, when he comes to the Book of Mormon, he writes: "[D]ealing with revealed faith is a difficult subject, especially when feelings run high on both sides of the question. I hope I have been able to treat the matter of Joseph Smith and the golden plates from Hill Cumorah in a responsible fashion. I will admit that I am skeptical of the original discovery; the absence of the actual ancient documents makes detailed analysis impossible today" (*Fantastic Archaeology*, 166). Earlier he had sidestepped the truth question by conceding that the dictation of the Book of Mormon "was quite a feat, whether miraculous or not is for others to judge" (163).

<sup>20</sup> Shipp has written that she does "not feel compelled to take a position on the disputed issue of whether Joseph Smith was the author or the translator of this extraordinary work"; she characterizes her stance as one of "stubborn silence." Shipp, "An 'Insider-Outsider' in Zion," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 15, no. 1 (Spring 1982): 143.

bible-minded people....”<sup>21</sup> Likewise, T. L. Brink calls the truth question an “irrelevant debate,” but in the very next sentence he alludes to Smith’s “literary fantasies,” making clear where he stands in this irrelevant debate.<sup>22</sup>

It is noteworthy that three authors who insist on the relative unimportance of the truth question for their discipline — Klaus Hansen, Lawrence Foster, and Jan Shipps — nevertheless offer explanations for Smith’s experiences which would serve to answer that question: depth psychology for Hansen, visionary trance for Foster and Shipps.<sup>23</sup> The idea that the truth question is unimportant for academic purposes is not as settled as some authors profess it to be — which may explain why authors feel a need to make these disclaimers at all. If it went without saying in the disciplines that the truth question is unimportant, why would authors need to say that? Indeed, contra those who prefer to sidestep the truth question, other commentators maintain that scholars have an obligation to offer secular explanations of Mormon origins. These include Alfred Bush, who once told Richard Bushman that a “historian is responsible ... for determining whether or not the [Book of Mormon] is true history”; Klaus Hansen, who, despite downplaying the truth question in *Mormonism and the American Experience*, also insisted that “if Mormons want to play by the rules of historical scholarship,” they must address the Book of Mormon’s “historical authenticity” (his emphasis); and Norman Murdoch, who lamented in a review essay that Bushman and Shipps did not address the question of the Book of Mormon’s authenticity, given that “being an historian means explaining the past in human terms.”<sup>24</sup>

## Naturalistic Explanations

About one fourth of the texts in my pool put forth understandings of Book of Mormon origins that challenge the objective reality of the Mormon story, typically by psychologizing or otherwise interiorizing Smith’s experiences. Lawrence Foster and Reed

<sup>21</sup> Sachs, “The Holy Scriptures,” 52.

<sup>22</sup> Brink writes that to ask whether the Book of Mormon reflects the influence of Ethan Smith’s *Views of the Hebrews* “focuses on an irrelevant debate. The relevant question is not who might have influenced that intellectual growth and source of literary fantasies of the young Smith, but how did his writings reflect his own complex personality and how did they serve so effectively as the foundation for the most successful religion of purely American origin?” 273.

<sup>23</sup> I say the authors “offer” their explanations because Hansen and Shipps present their explanations as possibilities only. (Hansen is actually summarizing theories offered by T. L. Brink.) Foster presents his theory in relatively more conclusive, yet still contingent, terms. Hansen, *Mormonism and the American Experience*, 24- 27; Shipps, *Mormonism*, 10, 39; Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, 296-297 n. 15.

<sup>24</sup> Bushman, *Believing History*, 263-64; Hansen, *Mormonism and the American Experience*, 248; Norman H. Murdoch, “Joseph Smith, the ‘Book of Mormon,’ and Mormonism: A Review Essay,” *New York History* 67 (1986): 229-230.

Holmes describe Smith’s visions of Moroni as “dreams,” G. St. John Stott as an “hallucination.”<sup>25</sup> Klaus Hansen reviews explanations for Smith’s experiences grounded in Jungian, Adlerian, and Eriksonian psychology, while William Morain develops a Freudian interpretation that traces Smith’s “trancelike states” and “fantasies” to the trauma produced by the operation on his leg and the exhuming of his brother Alvin.<sup>26</sup> Jan Shipps proposes that Smith’s experiences may represent the phenomenon of “visionary trance,” which she further opines (moving from a historical mode toward a theological one) is a means by which the Spirit “makes itself known to one portion of humanity.” Shipps probably regards her proposed explanation as working to defend the religious authenticity of Smith’s experiences: as she sees it, understanding Smith’s experiences as trance would mean placing them in the same category as the prophetic ecstasies described in the Hebrew Bible or Paul’s vision on the road to Damascus. Still, her trance theory shares with naturalistic accounts an impulse to treat Smith’s visions as subjectively, not objectively, real.<sup>27</sup> Other writers who promote or take for granted naturalistic understandings of Book of Mormon origins are David Holmes, who uses “stylometrics” to argue for Smith’s authorship of the book, and Paul Gutjahr, whose literary analyses assume that Smith is the author.<sup>28</sup>

The most extensive efforts to explain the Book of Mormon in naturalistic terms have been made by scholars who are former LDS or RLDS: Hansen, Morain, and Stott.<sup>29</sup> This fact is consistent with Hansen’s observation that those scholars who seem most preoccupied by problems of historicity “are largely multi-generational Mormons ... who were brought up to believe that if the Book of Mormon wasn’t true, it must be a monumental fraud.”<sup>30</sup>

## Implicit Skepticism

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<sup>25</sup> Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, 129; Holmes, *Dreamers of Zion*, 29; Stott, “Joseph Smith’s 1823 Vision,” 353. Holmes writes that “four years after his dream experience, Joseph drew the metallic plates from the earth.” Calling the vision a “dream experience” interiorizes the experience, but Holmes then speaks of the plates as if they were material objects, so it’s not certain from this text what he believes about the nature of Smith’s claims.

<sup>26</sup> Hansen, *Mormonism and the American Experience*, 24-26; Morain, *Sword of Laban*, ch. 4.

<sup>27</sup> Shipps, *Mormonism*, 10, 22.

<sup>28</sup> Holmes, “Stylometric Analysis”; Gutjahr, “Golden Bible”; Gutjahr, *American Bible*.

<sup>29</sup> Stott’s work has received little attention, though his was the most sedulous attempt to interpret the multiple, conflicting accounts of the Book of Mormon’s coming forth, within a naturalistic framework, prior to the elucidation of Dan Vogel’s “pious fraud” theory in *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2004).

<sup>30</sup> Klaus Hansen, “Jan Shipps and the Mormon Tradition,” *Journal of Mormon History* 11 (1984): 145.



Several authors make rhetorical moves that lend themselves to being read as *implicit* expressions of skepticism about Smith’s claims. These moves include: repeating doubts about Smith’s story expressed by others; observing that nonMormons find Smith’s claims incredible; and underscoring the fact that the plates were concealed from view or are no longer available for examination, having been “swept away” by the angel.<sup>31</sup> By including these details in their summaries of Smith’s story, the authors invite readers to conclude that “something fishy was going on” (to borrow Bushman’s phrase) but without the authors actually drawing that conclusion in the text. The passages quoted below illustrate what I have in mind. Inevitably when reading for implied meanings, there is a risk that I am reading into the text something the author did not intend. However, most of these passages come from authors who, somewhere else in their texts, explicitly signal disbelief in the objective reality of Smith’s claims, e.g., by giving a naturalistic account of Book of Mormon provenance. That fact lends plausibility to reading these passages as reflecting or implicitly conveying authorial skepticism. In any event, I have taken the space to reproduce a number of these passages so that readers can make their own judgment about the accuracy of my claim that these passages are implicitly skeptical.<sup>32</sup>

When a chagrined Harris asked Joseph why he could not retranslate the [lost 116 pages], he was told that designing enemies ... would make changes in the original.... Apparently it did not occur to Harris that such changes would be easily detected, since the manuscript was in his own handwriting....<sup>33</sup>

This “translation” purported to be an ancient religious history of two peoples of Hebraic extraction who had migrated to the American continent about 600 B.C....

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<sup>31</sup> 1 The phrase “swept away” is used by Garvey: “the plates were swept away by the angel after the successful translation” (“Prophet from Palmyra,” 64). In light of Garvey’s earlier assertion that “an eerie similarity” exists between the LDS Church and Jim Jones’s People’s Temple (60), the dramatic phrase “swept away” looks like it’s intended to be subtly disparaging, i.e., by calling attention to the suspicious convenience of Smith’s claim about Moroni’s reclaiming the plates. Garvey also invites a skeptical reading when he cites Peter Ingersoll’s report that Joseph Smith once admitted to him that the Book of Mormon was a monumental joke (66). Further, Garvey draws attention to what he sees as an inconsistency in Smith’s claims, noting that the story of how Smith translated the plates “varied to suit the needs of the audience” (67).

<sup>32</sup> The authors who explicitly signal disbelief in Smith’s claims in addition to making moves that I categorize as implicitly skeptical are Hansen, Garvey, Foster, Williams, and Morain. Stark, Finke, and Gordon, while making what I see as implicitly skeptical moves, do not explicitly signal disbelief elsewhere.

<sup>33</sup> Hansen, *Mormonism and the American Experience*, 6, 8.

Although non-Mormon archaeologists have not found this account historically persuasive, [it] had immense appeal in an early nineteenth-century America....<sup>34</sup>

Once the plates had been recovered, Smith kept them well hidden, for he feared they would be stolen.... The plates ... were kept well covered except when Smith was translating them. Even his good wife, Emma, never saw them directly; she only saw the package.<sup>35</sup>

Emma never saw [the plates], nor, in the absence of angels, did anyone else.... [A]s the hapless and frustrated Isaac Hale related, “... I was allowed to feel the weight of the box, and they gave me to understand that the book of plates was then in the box — into which, however, I was not allowed to look.”<sup>36</sup>

Four years later, Smith was finally able to secure the plates, bringing them home inside a locked trunk, which could not be opened, because, as he reminded everyone, to look directly upon the plates could be fatal. He also claimed to be able to read the plates through the trunk....<sup>37</sup>

Joseph Smith, the sect’s founder, prophet, and first president, translated the “golden plates,” which he reported were revealed to him by an angel. Smith was a visionary who had a reputation in upstate New York as a counterfeiter, fortuneteller, and treasure hunter.<sup>38</sup>

In different ways, these authors lay before readers information that calls Smith’s claims into question or otherwise signals the author’s incredulity. But they do so in ways that free the authors from the burden of having to directly challenge Smith’s claims, or his integrity, themselves. The reasons for preferring indirection may range from a desire to be respectful of Mormon beliefs (explicitly the case for Stephen Williams) to a conviction that the truth is too obvious to need spelling out (likely motivations for Klaus Hansen and Kevin Garvey, given the more overtly critical tone of their discussions). In any case, the decision to be implicitly skeptical reveals that while academic discourse is open to scholars voicing skepticism about LDS claims, there are also rhetorical pressures at work that motivate some authors to be restrained in how they do that.

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<sup>34</sup> Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, 129-130.

<sup>35</sup> Williams, *Fantastic Archaeology*, 162.

<sup>36</sup> Morain, *Sword of Laban*, 67, 76.

<sup>37</sup> Stark and Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 128.

<sup>38</sup> Gordon, *The Mormon Question*, 19.

## Distancing Devices

A number of authors create critical distance from Smith’s claims by placing quotation marks around the word “translation.”<sup>39</sup> Much the same effect is achieved through the use of modifiers such as “supposed,” “so-called,” “purported,” and “ostensibly.”<sup>40</sup> Writers may also distance themselves from Smith’s claims through the use of attribution: “Smith claimed,” “Smith said,” “according to Smith’s account,” and so on.<sup>41</sup> These devices are used by many authors across religious categories: non-Mormon, RLDS, disaffiliated LDS, and practicing LDS.

It is difficult to determine whether a particular author uses these devices (a) to imply skepticism or (b) to signal a posture of neutrality. In either case, quotation marks and modifiers clearly work to create critical distance. Attributions, by contrast, may or may not be intended to create critical distance: an author might use an attribution simply to identify the source of a particular piece of information. This ambiguity could make attribution an especially appealing device for scholars who might desire to position themselves ambiguously in relation to Mormon claims.

Jan Shipps, for example, frequently uses attributions in her treatment of the golden plates: “Smith *said* ... he had a vision of Moroni;” “he *reported* to his mother and father that he had learned of the existence of a cache of gold plates;” he “*said* that he had gained possession of the gold plates and the Urim and Thummim;” “he *reported* that the plates were in his possession;” “Joseph *said* that they were carried south hidden in a 40-gallon barrel of beans” (my emphasis).<sup>42</sup> These attributions could be read not as intending to create critical distance but as flowing out of Shipps’s interest in the construction of the

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<sup>39</sup> Garvey, “Prophet from Palmyra,” 64; Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, 129; Arrington, review, 470; Morain, *Sword of Laban*, 77; Blazer, review, 1790; Bringham, review, 319-320. Gordon places quotation marks around the phrase “golden plates” (*The Mormon Question*, 19). Morain places them around the word “vision” (*Sword of Laban*, 59) as well as around the words “obtained” (67) and “acquisition” (76) when speaking of Smith’s recovery of the plates from Cumorah.

<sup>40</sup> Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, 129; Jackson, “Latter-day Saints,” 64; O’Neill, “The Mormons, the Indians,” 78; Shipps, *Mormonism*, 2; Sachs, “Holy Scriptures,” 52; Launius, *Joseph Smith III*, 3; Arrington, *Great Basin Kingdom*, 3; Brooke, *Refiner’s Fire*, 156; Gutjahr, *American Bible*, 152; Ouellette, “Mormon Studies,” 112; Forsberg, *Equal Rites*, 25.

<sup>41</sup> May, “Mormons,” 720; Jackson, “Latter-day Saints,” 64, 67-68; O’Neill, “The Mormons, the Indians,” 78; Shipps, *Mormonism*, 9, 11-13, 17; Sachs, “Holy Scriptures,” 52; Shepherd, review of *Studies of the Book of Mormon*, 274; Hatch, *Democratization of American Christianity*, 125; Holmes, “A Stylometric Analysis,” (96); Gutjahr, “Golden Bible,” 277; Eliason, “Introduction,” 1; Bringham, review, 319-320; Gordon *The Mormon Question*, 21; Van Wagenen, *Texas Republic*, 13; Davies, Introduction to *Mormonism*, 36; Evans, *Romancing the Maya*, 90; Neilson and Woodworth, “Introduction,” in Bushman, *Believing History*, xiv.

<sup>42</sup> Shipps, *Mormonism*, 9, 11-13, 17.

Mormon story out of various accounts.<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, Shipps uses factual language — without attributions or modifiers — in discussing Smith’s revelations. She writes matter-of-factly of “a revelation to his father, probably given through the Urim and Thummim,” adding that “a revelation a month later directed Joseph to finish translating the record.”<sup>44</sup> As I pointed out earlier, Shipps inclines to the view that Smith’s revelations were actual communications of the Spirit through the medium of trance. Her use or disuse of attribution thus coincides with her belief in the reality of Smith’s revelations, which she discusses factually, as opposed to the existence of the plates, about which she professes neutrality and which she discusses with attributions. The use of attributions thus allows Shipps to retain an ambiguous stance toward those particular elements of Smith’s claims about which she prefers not to commit herself.

### Factual Language

Mormons who perceive the academy, as Bushman does, as a place where LDS “belief and practice are an offense”<sup>45</sup> might be surprised to see how often authors use factual language when discussing Smith’s visions and the discovery and translation of the plates. Co-authors Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang, for instance, speak matter-of-factly about “the ancient golden plates which Joseph Smith discovered and translated.”<sup>46</sup> Other non-Mormon authors from my pool of texts who use factual language are Richard Hughes, Stephen Williams, John Brooke, Paul Gutjahr, Timothy Wood, and Douglas Davies.<sup>47</sup> However, no non-Mormon author uses this kind of language without making some sort of distancing move farther away — often a modifier or attribution placed somewhere earlier in the text. The statement I just quoted from McDannell and Lang appears in a paragraph that opens, several sentences earlier, with the attribution, “According to Latter-day Saint belief...”

By contrast, Mormon scholars who use modifiers or attributions are more likely to use them in close proximity to what would otherwise be a factual assertion about Smith’s visions or the plates. Indeed, the distancing device typically occurs in the very same sentence, as when Dean May describes the Book of Mormon as “an additional book of scriptures [Smith] *claimed* to have translated from records inscribed on goldlike plates

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>45</sup> Bushman, *Believing History*, vii.

<sup>46</sup> McDannell and Lang, 313-314.

<sup>47</sup> Hughes, “Soaring with the Gods,” 27; Williams, *Fantastic Archaeology*, 161-163; Brooke, *Refiner’s Fire*, 154-156; Gutjahr, “Golden Bible,” 284; Wood, “The Prophet and the Presidency,” 170; Davies, *The Mormon Culture of Salvation*, 160; Davies, *Introduction to Mormonism*, 61.

provided by an angel,” or when Leonard Arrington writes that Smith “*purportedly* received visitations from heavenly beings and translated [the Book of Mormon] from gold plates” (my emphasis).<sup>48</sup> The contrast between Mormon writers’ use of distancing devices in close proximity to Smith’s claims and non-Mormon writers’ use of such devices at a greater remove from those same kinds of claims suggests that these Mormon writers are more anxious about the perception that they lack critical distance than are their non-LDS colleagues.

A dramatic illustration of this anxiety is a passage authored by Brigham Young University religion professor Kent P. Jackson for an anthology of perspectives on scripture from various faiths, published by University of South Carolina Press in 1985. Jackson uses modifiers and attributions so frequently that they become conspicuous:

Joseph Smith published what he claimed was a new volume of Christian scripture.... It purports to be the record of a people that lived in the western hemisphere.... Latter-day Saints believe that it records God’s word as revealed to the ancient prophets of the Americas.... Joseph Smith said that on the night of 21 September 1823, a messenger from God appeared to him.... He reported that he learned from Moroni [about the record’s contents] ... *In the Book of Mormon account*, Moroni was the last of a line of ancient American prophets.... *According to [Smith]*, Moroni appeared to him often.... At the appropriate time, the young prophet went to the burial spot, took possession of the record, translated it, and published his translation as the Book of Mormon. (my emphasis)<sup>49</sup>

Note that while Jackson recounts the recovery and translation of the plates in factual language (“the young prophet went to the burial spot, took possession of the record,” etc.), distancing devices punctuate the preceding sentences. This suggests that Jackson felt a need to qualify his presentation of Smith’s claims for a non-Mormon audience — though he managed, at a key moment, to use language consistent with his orthodox LDS conviction of the historicity of these events.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> May, “Mormons,” 720; Arrington, *Great Basin Kingdom*, 3. For other Mormon scholars (practicing LDS, disaffiliated LDS, or RLDS) who use modifiers or attributions in close proximity to a potentially scandalous claim, see Launius, *Joseph Smith III*, 3; Shepherd, review of *Studies of the Book of Mormon*, 274; Ouellette, “Mormon Studies,” 112; Eliason, “Introduction,” 1.

<sup>49</sup> Jackson, “Latter-day Saints,” 64, 67.

<sup>50</sup> It is conceivable that an editor may have added the distancing devices. Even if that were the case, the passage would still demonstrate an anxiety — albeit on the part of the editor, not the author — about the use of factual language by an LDS writer. Either way, the passage helps to illuminate the discourse conventions that govern academic presentations on the Book of Mormon.



## Avoiding Scandal: Rhetorical Strategies of Faithful Scholarship

Couched in terms of rhetoric, a principal aim of faithful scholarship is to present orthodox LDS claims in factual language, without the kinds of distancing devices that Jackson used so frequently. Givens is explicit about his desire to avoid such devices, which he calls “tiresome and pedantic,” in the Author’s Note that prefaces *By the Hand of Mormon*.<sup>51</sup> The first effort to use factual language in an academic publication outside the Mormon world was made by Richard Bushman in his 1984 *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*. Subsequently, LDS scholars Philip Barlow, Richard Turley, Grant Underwood, John Lundquist, Grant Hardy, and Terryl Givens have made similar efforts. (Community of Christ/RLDS scholars have not demonstrated the same impulse.)

However, no LDS scholar to date has used factual language in connection with Smith’s claims about the Book of Mormon *without also making some kind of rhetorical move which appears to disclaim interest in persuading readers that Smith’s claims are factual*. Lundquist and Underwood, much like nonMormon scholars we’ve considered, employ the device of placing an attribution early on in their discussion (“According to Mormon belief,” for Lundquist, “For the Latter-day Saints,” for Underwood), after which they use factual language with no further distancing devices.<sup>52</sup> In addition, Underwood establishes a precedent of using factual language to describe non-Mormon religious experiences, as when he writes that the followers of Nathaniel Wood “enjoyed the gifts of the spirit, including prophecy.” This precedent allows him to then make factual statements about Smith’s experiences (“The resulting theophany [the First Vision] inaugurated a decade of divine dispensations that culminated in 1830 with the publication of the Book of Mormon.... Plenary inspiration and divine authority were once again on the earth” without necessarily looking like he’s advocating the facticity of Mormon beliefs.<sup>53</sup> That is, readers could understand Underwood to be subscribing to a convention of writing factually about all religious experiences for the sake of neutrality.

There are two principal strategies by which faithful scholars have justified their use of factual language: (1) they claim to be using factual language for purposes other than advocacy of the orthodox Mormon account; or (2) they announce that they are writing from a distinctively Mormon perspective. Bushman employs both strategies in *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, where he explains that “believing Mormons like

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<sup>51</sup> “I have ... avoided constructions like ‘Joseph Smith’s *alleged* vision,’ or ‘the *purported* visit of Moroni,’ as they would become tiresome and pedantic if repeated on every page.” Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*, Author’s Note (no page number).

<sup>52</sup> Lundquist, “Biblical Seafaring,” 171; Underwood, *Millenarian World*, 24, 66.

<sup>53</sup> Underwood, *Millenarian World*, 20-23.

myself understand the origins of the Book of Mormon quite differently from others” and wonders how he can “accommodate a Mormon’s perception of events and still make sense to a general audience.” (Note that Bushman professes to want only to “accommodate” a Mormon perception, rather than, say, to “defend” or “advocate” for it.) His solution to the problem he poses is “to relate events as the participants themselves experienced them, using their own words where possible.” His method, he knows, will leave “general readers ... with questions about the meaning of these experiences, but at least they will have an understanding of how early Mormons perceived the world.”<sup>54</sup> Though somewhat ambiguous, this statement *appears* to disclaim the truth question. That is, the statement seems to imply that Bushman uses factual language in order to reproduce participants’ understanding of these experiences, not to make an argument about how readers should understand them. At least three reviewers of the book understood Bushman’s intentions this way.<sup>55</sup>

Like Bushman, Richard Turley explains his decision to recount early Mormon history in LDS terms, in his book *Victims*, as an attempt to help non-LDS readers understand the LDS version (which in turn will help them understand the “tension” between canonical accounts and the Hoffman forgeries). The narrative that follows is not couched, strictly speaking, in factual language but relies heavily on direct quotation with accompanying attributions. Readers might therefore have understood Turley to be neutrally reproducing Mormon accounts. However, the fact that Turley feels he has to explain his use of canonical sources indicates that he does not see his summary of Mormon history as neutral and thus needs to deflect suspicions that he is being apologetic. His strategy for deflecting those suspicions is a version of the first strategy listed above: professing to use canonical accounts for purposes other than advocacy of Mormon orthodoxy — in Turley’s case, to give non-Mormons a window into the Mormon worldview.<sup>56</sup>

The most recent instance of an LDS scholar justifying a matter-of-fact reproduction of LDS claims occurs in Terryl Givens’s *By the Hand of Mormon*. In a prefatory note, Givens explains that he has “avoided constructions like ‘Joseph Smith’s *alleged* vision,’ or ‘the *purported* visit of Moroni,’” on the grounds that “the disputability of the facts is too

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<sup>54</sup> 4 Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, 3.

<sup>55</sup> Norman H. Murdoch and Martin Ridge believe that Bushman intended to sidestep the debate about whether Smith’s claims are true or fraudulent. In a similar vein, Ferenc W. Szasz reads Bushman as “offer[ing] each reader a chance to come to his or her own opinion on the claims of the first Mormon prophet.” Norman H. Murdoch, “Joseph Smith, the ‘Book of Mormon,’ and Mormonism: A Review Essay,” *New York History* 67 (1986): 229; Martin Ridge, “Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, and a Religious Tradition,” *Reviews in American History*, 14, no. 1. (March 1986): 27; Ferenc W. Szasz, review of *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, *New Mexico Historical Review* 61, no. 1 (January 1986), 84.

<sup>56</sup> Turley, *Victims*, viii, 3-5.

obvious to bear repeating on every page” (his emphasis). More directly than Bushman or Turley, Givens denies an intention to advocate for the orthodox LDS view, stating that his “focus in any case has not been on whether the Book of Mormon or the account of it given by Joseph Smith is true.”<sup>57</sup> As we will see shortly, this statement is arguably disingenuous.

Bushman’s second strategy for legitimizing the use of factual language — openly identifying his perspective as that of a believer — was subsequently adopted by Philip Barlow (in *Mormons and the Bible*) and Grant Hardy (in his reader’s edition of the Book of Mormon). Having identified themselves as believers,<sup>58</sup> Barlow and Hardy go on to recount the discovery and translation of the plates in matter-of-fact terms, without distancing devices. Barlow, however, takes some pains to identify as a relatively liberal believer, in the process of which he makes arguments on behalf of scholarly objectivity and a Romantic religiosity that would tend to align him more with New Mormon Historians like Dean May, Leonard Arrington, and Thomas Alexander than with the more assertively orthodox “faithful” scholarship represented by Bushman or FARMS.<sup>59</sup> By contrast, Hardy’s book is the boldest presentation of an orthodox LDS perspective yet published in the non-Mormon academy. Unlike Bushman, who identified as a believer yet took care to point out why non-Mormons could find his history useful, Hardy offers no explanation as to why non-Mormon academics should be interested in “an insider’s point of view” about the Book of Mormon. Hardy rather, takes the value of his LDS perspective for granted and appears to expect readers to do the same. In a move that might be read as soft missionizing, Hardy quotes at some length from Gordon B. Hinckley’s testimony of the Book of Mormon, calling attention to Hinckley’s confidence “that a fair examination of all the relevant evidence will support the claims of faith.” However, Hardy’s professed goal is to promote academic understanding.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*, Author’s Note (no page number).

<sup>58</sup> To be precise, Barlow labels himself a “practicing Mormon” (*Mormons and the Bible*, xviii), while Hardy calls himself a “believer” and an “insider” (*Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Edition*, viii).

<sup>59</sup> Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible*, xv-xviii. Barlow distances himself from certain unnamed LDS writers who “hope to make the church invulnerable to fair and open historical inquiry by asserting the incomprehensibility of ‘objectivity’” (xvii). Such assertions have been made most stridently by Louis Midgley and David Bohn, but also by Richard Bushman. Louis Midgley, “The Myth of Objectivity: Some Lessons for Latter-day Saints,” *Sunstone*, August 1990, 54-56; David Earl Bohn, “No Higher Ground: Objective History is an Illusive Chimera,” *Sunstone*, May-June 1983, 26-32; Richard L. Bushman, “Introduction: The Future of Mormon History,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 1, no. 3 (Autumn 1966): 24; Richard L. Bushman, “Faithful History,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 4, no. 4 (Winter 1969): 11-25.

<sup>60</sup> Hardy, *Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Edition*, viii-ix.

Both of the primary strategies LDS scholars have used to justify factual language — professing not to be advocating for LDS claims and identifying one’s perspective as that of a believer — are problematic. As we have seen, Bushman seemingly and Givens unambiguously deny that they are trying to weigh in on the truthfulness of Mormon beliefs. Nevertheless, both *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* and *By the Hand of Mormon* had apologetic dimensions, a fact not lost on reviewers.<sup>61</sup> Both authors offered evidence that supported LDS claims about the Book of Mormon being a translation of an ancient record, and both responded to contemporary challenges to the book’s historicity (e.g., readings of the book as a reflection of its nineteenth-century environment).<sup>62</sup> In light of the apologetic dimensions of their work, Bushman’s and Givens’ claims to have used factual language for purposes other than advocacy may look disingenuous.

The second strategy — identifying one’s perspective as that of a believer — is problematic because it tends to relegate faithful scholarship to a special category, detached from larger scholarly conversation. *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* received kind but guarded reviews indicating that non-Mormon readers saw the book as a useful source for understanding Smith the way Mormons see him, but not as an authoritative interpretation of Mormon history.<sup>63</sup> In contrast to LDS reviewers who lauded Bushman for successfully working from a faithful perspective without sacrificing scholarly standards, other reviewers faulted Bushman’s work (albeit gently) for being apologetic and uncritical, giving “unwarranted facticity to verbal quotations,” and offering a

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<sup>61</sup> Reviewers of Bushman who characterized his work as apologetic or as following official church lines are: Murdoch, “Joseph Smith,” 230; Ridge, “Joseph Smith,” 27; Marvin S. Hill, “Richard L. Bushman — Scholar and Apologist,” *JMH* 11 (1984): 125-133; Gary Shepherd, review of *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 25, no. 2 (June 1986): 267-268; Mark A. Noll, review of *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, *American Historical Review* 91 (1986): 185-186; Samuel S. Hill, review of *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, *Western Historical Quarterly* 17, no. 2 (April 1986): 230-231; Richard E. Bennett, review of *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, *Journal of American Ethnic History* 10, no. 4 (Summer 1991): 95. Reviewers who saw Givens’ book as apologetic are: Massimo Introvigne, “LDS Apologetics from Oxford?” *Sunstone*, July 2002, 58-59; Benson Bobrick, “The Gospel According to Joseph Smith,” *New York Times Book Review*, 18 August 2002, 11; Jana Reiss, “Book of Mormon Stories,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 35, no. 3 (Fall 2002): 242. Though he does not use the word “apologetic,” Daniel Peterson is excited by the various passages in which Givens supports the Book of Mormon’s authenticity — passages which Peterson helpfully quotes in his review. Daniel C. Peterson, review of *By the Hand of Mormon*, *Brigham Young University Studies* 43, no. 4 (2004): 140-149.

<sup>62</sup> Bushman, 87-88, ch. 4; Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*, 120-121, 142-143, ch. 6.

<sup>63</sup> Reviewers granted that Bushman’s book would be “useful to scholars who want to understand Joseph Smith, Jr. as Mormons see him” (Murdoch, 228) and was even, therefore, “the proper place to start” in understanding Mormon history (Ridge, 27). But readers would want to “go on to engage other points of view.” Robert S. Ellwood, review of *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, *Journal of Religion* 67 (1987): 561.

“limited perspective.”<sup>64</sup> Among faithful scholars, Givens’ work has evoked even more enthusiastic responses than Bushman’s. But in the non-Mormon academy, *By the Hand of Mormon* has been essentially ignored, a further sign of faithful scholarship’s detachment from academic conversation.<sup>65</sup>

## Handling the Witnesses

What of the witnesses who professed to have handled the golden plates — potentially the chief occasion for scandal in academic conversation about the Book of Mormon? How is their claim handled in academic discourse? The vast majority of the writers in my pool simply do not discuss the testimony of the eight witnesses (or, for that matter, the testimony of the three). These writers include LDS scholars Leonard Arrington, Dean May, Kent Jackson, Philip Barlow, Richard Turley, Grant Underwood, John Lundquist, and Craig Campbell. No doubt in many cases — LDS and otherwise — the omission results from the need to be brief. Still, in light of Givens’ assertion that the eight witnesses’ testimony is “perhaps the most extensive and yet contentious body of evidence in support of the tactile reality of supernaturally conveyed artifacts that we have in the modern age,”<sup>66</sup> it is striking that most non-Mormon scholars writing on the Book of Mormon do not attempt to come to terms with that evidence. Most non-Mormon scholars, it would seem, do not regard the witnesses as a challenge that must be answered.

Six non-“faithful” scholars do discuss the witnesses’ claims: Klaus Hansen, Jan Shipps, G. St. John Stott, Stephen Williams, Douglas Davies, and R. Tripp Evans. Four of those six, Hansen, Shipps, Williams, and Evans, place the word “hefted” or “handled” in quotation marks.<sup>67</sup> In addition, Shipps uses attribution when she discusses reports about the plates’ tangibility, such as their being transported in a barrel or stored in Emma’s red

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<sup>64</sup> For admiring LDS responses, see James B. Allen, review of *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, *Pacific Historical Review* 56 (1987): 307-308; Philip L. Barlow, “Joseph Smith’s Revision of the Bible: Fraudulent, Pathologic, or Prophetic?” *Harvard Theological Review* 83 (1990): 46. It should be observed that several LDS reviewers — practicing and disaffiliated — had more ambiguous or critical reactions to Bushman’s book. The reviewers who faulted Bushman for “unwarranted facticity” and “limited perspective,” are Gary Shepherd, 268 (footnote 61, above), and Davis Bitton, “The Mormon Past: The Search for Understanding,” *Religious Studies Review* 11, no. 2 (April 1985): 115.

<sup>65</sup> Of the reviews of Givens cited in footnote 61, all but one appeared in Mormon publications. The exception is Benson Bobrick’s review in the *New York Times Book Review*, which does not meet my criteria for an academic publication. I have yet to see reviews of *By the Hand of Mormon* in academic publications outside the Mormon world.

<sup>66</sup> Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*, 22. For similar remarks, see Givens, *Viper on the Hearth*, 91.

<sup>67</sup> Hansen, *Mormonism and the American Experience*, 7; Shipps, *Mormonism*, 23; Williams, *Fantastic Archaeology*, 163; Evans, *Romancing the Maya*, 90.



morocco trunk.<sup>68</sup> Stott downplays the witnesses’ significance by stating that their account “has had to stand alone” and observing that “most non-Mormons” have found the witnesses’ testimony “insufficient evidence for the existence of the plates.” Davies reports that witnesses affirmed having seen the plates but says nothing about anyone claiming to have *handled* them.<sup>69</sup> The only scholars in any category (non-Mormon, Community of Christ, LDS) who speak in factual terms about witnesses handling the plates are Richard Bushman and Terryl Givens.<sup>70</sup> But Bushman’s and Givens’ use of factual language is ostensibly not intended as an assertion of facticity. No writer affirms that witnesses handled the golden plates without disclaiming advocacy or otherwise distancing him or herself rhetorically from the witnesses’ claims. No writer, in other words, actually argues that the witnesses’ claims ought to be taken at face value, though Givens comes as close to this as he can without patently belying his professed disinterest in the truth question.

## Conclusion

What can be concluded about the conventions that govern how Book of Mormon provenance is handled in academic discourse? Nakedly deprecatory treatments of Smith’s claims are permissible but rare. One strain of scholarship holds that the truthfulness of Smith’s claims is a question lying outside academic discourse. Nevertheless, the academy remains open to attempts to explain Smith’s experiences in naturalistic (e.g., psychological) terms. In effect, this means that scholars who disbelieve Smith’s account are free to argue for alternative explanations of what really happened. Many scholars, however, express skepticism only implicitly or adopt a stance of critical detachment. In recent years, academic publishers have permitted LDS scholars to imply the objective truthfulness of Smith’s claims through the use of factual language and even sophisticated, softly pitched apologetics. But to do this, faithful scholars have had to (1) pose as disclaiming apologetics, a move that risks looking disingenuous, or (2) label

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<sup>68</sup> Shipps, *Mormonism*, 13.

<sup>69</sup> 9 Stott, “The Seer Stone Controversy,” 37-38; Davies, *Introduction to Mormonism*, 62. Interestingly, when faithful scholar Grant Hardy summarizes the witnesses’ experience, he, like Davies, writes of witnesses *seeing* the plates but does not mention witnesses *handling* them: “eleven men and one woman testified that they had seen the gold plates” (*Book of Mormon: Reader’s Edition*, xi, my emphasis). On the other hand, Hardy reproduces the eight witnesses’ statement in an appendix (631-633) and alludes factually to the plates as displaying a tangible reality in other contexts: wrapped in linen, lying on the table, etc. (xiii).

<sup>70</sup> Bushman, Joseph Smith and the *Beginnings of Mormonism*, 106-107; Givens, *Viper on the Hearth*, 91; Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*, 40. Actually, Givens’ treatments are difficult to classify as factual or not, probably by design. In both *Viper on the Hearth* and *By the Hand of Mormon*, Givens *quotes* the witnesses’ claim to have handled the plates, a rhetorical move that could be read as distancing. However, the overall tenor of Givens’ discussion is to cast the witnesses’ experience as empirical evidence for the plates’ tangible reality. Bushman and Givens also quote Lucy Smith’s claim to have felt the interpreters through a cloth (Bushman, 82; Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*, 22).

themselves as believers, a move that effectively detaches their work from larger academic conversations. A lack of symmetry exists: scholars may openly argue against the orthodox account of the Book of Mormon, but faithful scholars may not openly argue for it. Again, however, the majority of writers in my pool appear uncomfortable with either of those options, preferring a pose of neutrality.

Can LDS scholars credibly voice orthodox perspectives about the Book of Mormon in non-Mormon academic forums? My analysis suggests that the answer is yes only if “voicing” an orthodox perspective means something other than “openly advocating for it.” If faithful scholars are content to speak before academic audiences in a mode analogous to show-and-tell (“here’s what Mormons believe”), they are likely to be tolerated. If faithful scholars seek to overtly persuade academic audiences that the orthodox account of the Book of Mormon is historically accurate, scandal is almost certain to result because such attempts are bound to be labeled “apologetics” or “evangelism.” Hence the consternation produced when BYU’s John Clark affirmed, during the Joseph Smith symposium at the Library of Congress in May 2005, that archaeological evidence compels the conclusion that the Book of Mormon is an ancient record translated through supernatural means. Even for a number of faithful LDS scholars, Clark had crossed a line.<sup>71</sup>

The scandal provoked by Clark’s presentation reveals that scholars united in their commitment to the faithful scholarship project disagree as to its rhetorical aims. Some, like Clark, want to champion LDS convictions; others, like Bushman and Givens, realize that prevailing discursive politics in the academy require a less assertive approach. If Mormon studies are to be successfully established in the academic mainstream — the goal of ongoing efforts at Claremont, Utah Valley State College, and Utah State University — then more assertive versions of faithful scholarship will have to be excluded from forums seeking academic legitimacy. That imperative may produce an ironic situation: faithful scholars, like Bushman, who faulted the *New Mormon History* for being

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<sup>71</sup> A video file of Clark’s remarks is available at <http://www.lds.org/library/display/0,4945,510-1-3067-1,00.html>; see also “Events, Projects Mark Joseph Smith’s Bicentennial,” *Sunstone*, May 2005, 74. As the Library of Congress event concluded, Douglas Davies wondered aloud whether this had been an academic symposium or an evangelistic one. Jan Shippis subsequently remarked that the “highly orthodox” tone of some discussions at the symposium raised questions about whether LDS scholars “know how to operate in the professional world of history.” See “Events, Projects,” 74; Carrie A. Moore, “Scholars Moving to S.L.,” *Deseret News*, 21 June 2005, <http://deseretnews.com/dn/view2/1,4382,600143054,00.html>. Though I would not consider the Library of Congress symposium an academic forum, given that it had a primarily lay audience, organizers had conspicuously advertised the event as “an academic conference.”

insufficiently assertive about LDS perspectives, may now find themselves in the position of having to persuade LDS colleagues to be less assertive.<sup>72</sup>

All of this raises the question: What is the goal of the less assertive versions of faithful scholarship? Bushman and Givens understand that academic discourse conventions do not allow them to factually represent orthodox Mormon claims with the purpose of persuading scholars that those claims are factual. But if their goal is not persuasion, what does motivate their desire to represent orthodox claims factually? Is it to quiet their own consciences? Is it because bringing faithful scholarship into academic venues assures Mormons that their faith is credible regardless of whether anyone else is persuaded? Are efforts to take faithful scholarship to places like Yale or the Library of Congress primarily bids for status? Bushman has recently questioned whether Mormons should settle for the “broad tolerance” with which most academics currently handle orthodox Mormon claims. “Wouldn’t we prefer,” he asks, “to be taken seriously enough to be directly opposed?”<sup>73</sup> My analysis suggests that most scholars are not inclined to “take seriously” Mormon claims in the sense that Bushman uses that phrase. Neutrality toward Mormon claims, or at least the appearance of neutrality, is the preferred academic game. If faithful scholars resist playing by the rules of that game because they want to argue for the authenticity of the Book of Mormon’s claim to be a supernatural translation from tangible golden plates, it is difficult to see how they can avoid scandal. Perhaps Bushman is saying he would prefer scandal. But would that not hamper efforts to settle Mormon studies in non-Mormon academic institutions?

## Appendix

This appendix contains the full bibliographic information for the fifty texts that constituted my pool for analysis. Inclusion in the pool required that a text meet the following criteria:

- (a) contains a summary or narrative, even if brief, of the Book of Mormon’s coming forth (the angelic visitation, the recovery of the plates from Cumorah, the translation).
- (b) appears in an academic publication outside the Mormon world. I defined “academic” publications to include journals associated with universities or widely recognized professional associations and books from presses that primarily market themselves as serving academic audiences.

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<sup>72</sup> In 1966, Bushman complained that “religious faith has little influence on Mormon historians” because of a failure to “replace [their] conventional, secular American presuppositions with the more penetrating insights of our faith.” Bushman, “Faithful History,” 16; republished in *Believing History*, 8-9.

<sup>73</sup> Bushman, *Believing History*, 269.

(c) was published within the last quarter century, 1980-2005.

The texts are listed in alphabetical order by author’s last name. An asterisk (\*) indicates that there is question about whether a text meets my criteria for an “academic” publication. I included these texts in the pool to give them the benefit of the doubt but have nuanced my conclusions when necessary to indicate these texts’ questionable status.

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