

**George D. Smith, ed., *Faithful History: Essays on Writing Mormon History*. Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 1992. iv + 314 pp. \$18.95 (paperback).**

Reviewed by Gary F. Novak

*Faithful History* is a collection of essays from Signature Books that includes at least some of the recent discussion of the relationship of faith and history. Although editor George D. Smith deserves credit for publishing essays previously difficult of access like D. Michael Quinn's "On Being a Mormon Historian," the most noticeable thing about the volume is what was not included. Any discussion of "faithful history" remains incomplete without consideration of important essays by Thomas G. Alexander, M. Gerald Bradford, James Clayton, Marvin Hill, and Peter Novick.<sup>1</sup> One can only speculate as to the reasons these essays were excluded while essays of marginal importance by Paul M. Edwards, C. Robert Mesle, Melvin T. Smith, Kent E. Robson, and Edward H. Ashment were included.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas G. Alexander, "Historiography and the New Mormon History: A Historian's Perspective," *Dialogue* 19/3 (Fall 1986): 25–49; M. Gerald Bradford, "The Case for the New Mormon History: Thomas G. Alexander and His Critics," *Dialogue* 21/4 (1988): 143–50; James L. Clayton, "Does History Undermine Faith?" *Sunstone* 7 (March/April 1982): 33–40; Marvin S. Hill, "The 'New Mormon History' Reassessed in Light of Recent Books on Joseph Smith and Mormon Origins," *Dialogue* 21/3 (Autumn 1988): 115–27; Marvin S. Hill, "Afterword," *BYU Studies* 30/4 (Fall 1990): 115–24; Peter Novick, "Why the Old Mormon Historians Are More Objective Than the New," transcript of a recording made at the 1989 Sunstone Symposium, August 23–26, in Salt Lake City.

<sup>2</sup> While Paul Edwards's "The Irony of Mormon History" is not quite up to typical Edwardian standards of obfuscation, the essay is now dated as a theoretical piece. Here and now its only interest is that it appears to contain the first use of the word "historicism" in the context of Mormon history. C. Robert Mesle's "History, Faith, and Myth" contains all the usual confusions of "fact," "truth" and "evidence." Largely an attempt to soften some of the traditional language of the foundation events, "History, Faith, and Myth" prescribes how this could be done. Melvin T. Smith's "Faithful History/Secular Religion" is another confused apology for objectivist history. Kent Robson's "Objectivity and History," while more coherent than Melvin Smith's essay, is an attempt to save "truth, objectivity, and rationality" from the "relativism, . . . subjectivity, . . . [and] lack of objectivity" (p. 157) he perceives in certain writings of David Bohn and Louis Midgley. Robson is seemingly so concerned about an attack on





The “Editor’s Introduction” is a particularly bad place to get an introduction to the issues discussed in these essays. George Smith suggests that the “term ‘faithful history’ has at least two meanings: history written to express and support religious faith, and history that attempts to be faithful to the past” (p. vii). Smith attempts to drive a wedge between religious history and history “faithful to the past,” clearly implying that religious history is not or cannot be faithful to what he naively calls “the past.” Richard Bushman, from whom the term “faithful history” is borrowed, makes no distinctions between religious history and history “faithful to the past.” Bushman suggests that “Mormon historians should at least ask how we might replace our conventional, secular American presuppositions with more of the penetrating insights of our faith” (p. 7). When borrowing Richard Bushman’s words, Smith would have done better to examine carefully the way in which Bushman uses them.

Smith then discourses on the history of “historiography,” but this effort is elementary at best. The reason for the paragraphs on the history of history is to introduce distinctions between “verifiable facts,” “factual events,” and their relationship to “a more inclusive past” and “relativist methodologies” that have “added religious presuppositions to the terms of inquiry” (p. viii). Smith clearly sides with the factual, more inclusive past since the reexamination of “traditional accounts in the context of contemporary American culture [have] challenged some of the sources” (p. viii). These “sources” turn out to be, in some cases, the foundation texts for the Church: the First Vision, the vision of the three degrees of glory, and the Book of Mormon (p. xi). Not surprisingly, Smith is careful to point out that Joseph Smith’s “inspiration cannot be verified; the words of the three witnesses express their beliefs but they cannot prove the authenticity of the Book of Mormon” (p. ix). Smith is not critical of his own objectivist ideology and distorts or oversimplifies the position of those who provide that criticism.

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“truth, objectivity, and rationality” that those words occur in various combinations throughout the essay. Robson also creatively misreads Midgley and Bohn, giving their views the worst possible meaning. He would have done better to examine what historians actually write and how they use words like “objectivity” before beginning his theoretical discussion. Edward H. Ashment’s “Historiography of the Canon” is certainly the most bizarre essay included and contains the most outlandish defense of objectivist history to date.





Smith is correct, however, in focusing his discussion on the Book of Mormon. He seems especially sensitive to “traditionalist” criticism of “the new historiography” and its attempts to avoid arguing “whether Joseph Smith was a prophet or a fraud” and to “understand Mormonism as a part of the American religious experience” (p. ix). Traditionalists, Smith claims, “typically reject compromises, such as the view that a mythical Book of Mormon can evince religious authenticity as ‘inspired redaction’ ” (p. ix). But Smith does not begin to report the reasons “traditionalists” may have for rejecting such claims. Smith does not explain how a “mythical Book of Mormon,” whatever that is, or perhaps more accurately, the Book of Mormon understood as part of Joseph Smith’s myth-making, is anything but a less strident version of the old anti-Mormon position of the Book of Mormon as fraud. Less clear is the question of whether “religious authenticity” is the religion of Jesus Christ or just more of the philosophies of men mingled with scripture.

Critics of Smith’s “New Mormon History” have correctly noted that the question of understanding the Mormon past, of faithful history, comes to a head on the question of the authenticity of the Book of Mormon. It is when examining this question that the conflict between “new explanations,” e.g., naturalistic explanations, and traditional accounts, i.e., faithful history, can be made plain.

D. Michael Quinn’s “On Being a Mormon Historian” is significantly changed from the typescript of his 1981 talk. Not only has Quinn added a lengthy apology for his activity since leaving BYU, but he has also combined paragraphs and added material to the 1981 core. I am confident that he would find, by the standards of inquiry he applies to others, his own “policy of retroactive editing,” “deleted evidence,” and “reversed meanings” not merely “important,” but among the “more essential problems” of his essay.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The quoted materials are located in n. 25 (p. 125). They are part of a long complaint about differences between the *History of the Church* and the sources from which it was compiled. When examining this kind of argument, one can begin to sense the frustration someone like Quinn might have with Quinn’s own essay. Notice the following sample of changes between the typescript of his 1981 talk and the published version. “In addition to these jaundiced *ecclesiastical* views of Mormon history . . .” (1981, p. 3) and “In addition to these jaundiced views . . .” (p. 71). Not only has the word “ecclesiastical” been dropped, but also part of the sentence.





One of the strangest aspects of Quinn's essay is the autobiographical material. Instead of telling his story in the first person, Quinn uses the third person. This allows him the luxury of referring to himself as "this faltering young historian," "this young historian" (p. 74) and "the young man" (p. 73). While this adds a sense of melodrama that might not otherwise be possible, it hardly seems necessary.

Other oddities also occur. Quinn informs us that as a boy "he subjected any religious proposition to rigid analysis" (p. 73). Of course he means rigorous analysis; one can only begin to speculate to what "rigid analysis" might refer. By the time he was eighteen he "had made a line-by-line comparison of the 1830 Book of Mormon with later editions" (p. 73). While this task is no doubt noble, the footnote claims that "the most detailed presentation of all changes in the Book of Mormon's published 1830 text is the non-scholarly study by Jerald and Sandra Tanner" (p. 101). Quinn seems unaware of the *Critical Edition of the Book of Mormon* published by F.A.R.M.S. Finally, Quinn tells us that he "completed a score of publications in LDS history, several of which have been described as 'controversial' by some people" (p. 74). Curiously, the footnote does not mention any book or article Quinn had written before 1981, but instead refers to reviews of two books written after he had delivered the original talk.

Of course Quinn's personal odyssey ought not to have any bearing on his defense of objective history, New Mormon History, and environmental explanations of the foundation texts. Indeed, except for establishing his sincerity and honesty, which Quinn clearly thinks are relevant to a defense of New Mormon History, it is difficult to establish a clear connection between Quinn's personal history and a theoretical discussion of objectivity and environmental explanations.

When historians use the word "objectivity," it is clear that it either functions as a part of a system of rewards and punishments or as a way of handling evidence. For example, when criticizing Fawn Brodie's *No Man Knows My History*, Marvin Hill wonders "whether Brodie was very objective in formulating

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"Saints who profess to write objective Mormon history" (1981, p. 3) now becomes "Saints who profess to write 'fair and objective' Mormon history" (p. 72). Not only have the words "fair and" been added to the sentence, but they are now contained within quotations. Of course, no one would presume that an "objective" history would not also be "fair." An unfair objective history would not, by definition, be "objective."





her thesis.”<sup>4</sup> Hill goes on in the next paragraph to expand somewhat on his criticism: “It is difficult to understand how Brodie could have so badly misjudged Asael unless she formulated her thesis before she examined his writings.”<sup>5</sup> Here Hill gives a clear example of one of the functions of “objectivity”: Brodie is punished for her thesis. Hill also provides a good example of using the word “objectivity” to evaluate evidence: “Furthermore, [historians] have perhaps been satisfied with what Brodie had to say and seem hesitant to deal with Smith’s visions, his golden plates and his witnesses, all of which are awkward to handle objectively.”<sup>6</sup> In this case what Hill means by “objective” is that historians are unable to experience Joseph’s visions or examine the gold plates themselves. Of course, there seem to be no objective standards of objectivity. For Dale L. Morgan, *No Man Knows My History* was very nearly the last word in objective scholarship on Joseph Smith.<sup>7</sup>

When Quinn begins to discuss theoretical issues, the essay goes from bad to worse. Quinn complains about criticism from Boyd K. Packer, Ezra Taft Benson, and Louis Midgley regarding environmental explanations of the Church’s foundation events. Quinn defines the word “environment” so broadly that the word loses almost all meaning. “Without environmental influence or surrounding significant circumstances,” says Quinn, “there would be no revelation from God to the prophets” (p. 77). It would, of course, be silly to say that prophets are unaware of their “environment” in the sense of being aware of circumstances around them. But this is clearly not the sort of thing “New Mormon Historians,” for lack of a better term, mean when they call certain kinds of explanations “environmental” or “naturalistic.”

What is meant when using the term “environmental” to explain the foundation texts, especially the Book of Mormon? Richard Bushman says, “According to the environmentalists, Joseph absorbed images, attitudes, and conceptions from upstate New York rural culture and wove them into the Book of

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<sup>4</sup> Marvin S. Hill, “Secular or Sectarian History? A Critique of *No Man Knows My History*,” *Church History* 43 (March 1974): 89.

<sup>5</sup> Hill, “Secular or Sectarian History,” 89.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>7</sup> John Phillip Walker, ed., *Dale Morgan on Early Mormonism: Correspondence and A New History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986), 160–65 and *passim*.





Mormon.”<sup>8</sup> The point of discovering what parts of the upstate New York environment went into the Book of Mormon is to demonstrate how Joseph Smith may have fabricated it. When George D. Smith discusses the “sources of the Book of Mormon,” he provides a genuinely environmental explanation. For Smith, the sources of the Book of Mormon include “Joseph Smith’s own personal experiences,” Ethan Smith’s *View of the Hebrews*, “stories of the mysterious Indian burial mounds,” and facile borrowings from the Bible.<sup>9</sup> Smith’s explanation comes down clearly on the not-prophet side of the prophet/not-prophet dichotomy.

Whatever else may be said about environmental explanations, they are clearly not benign nor merely conditions that prophets “observe or experience” (p. 77). To attempt to define the word “environmental” so broadly as to include everything is merely an attempt at softening the language. Quinn would have done better to examine carefully the way Elder Packer and Midgley use the word, examine the sorts of arguments to which they object, compare their arguments with the examples they employ, and then object to their examples if incorrectly used. Providing a soft or thin definition of “environmental” serves only to cloud the issues.

After softening the definition of “environmental,” Quinn introduces a distinction between monistic history and pluralistic history (p. 79). Pluralistic history is, of course, the good history because it considers “more than one explanation” (p. 79). Pluralistic history is also preferable because it “acknowledge[s] the existence of other reasonable, honest, and conscientious interpretations” (p. 80). Although I do not wish to argue solely for “monistic histories,” if these are the categories in which I must work, these personal qualities of the “pluralistic” historian, while admirable, do not guarantee true history.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 128.

<sup>9</sup> George D. Smith, “Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon,” *Free Inquiry* 4/1 (Winter 1983): 21–31.

<sup>10</sup> We can illustrate the point with a little example. Occasionally when driving out of town, my wife will read the map and navigate. She certainly does not want to get lost any more than anyone else and provides reasonable, conscientious, and honest directions. However, on occasion, we still end up lost. Of course, no one has been dishonest, unreasonable, or unconscientious, just somehow mistaken or just plain wrong.





Quinn then illustrates how alternative explanations and differing categories can be employed for the good of pluralistic history. According to Quinn, the Book of Mormon suggests that the destruction of the Nephites can be attributed to adultery, fornication, the Gadianton robbers, secret combinations, unrighteous lawyers and judges, and pride (p. 80). He then suggests that “secular terms” can be used to describe the same events. Those terms include “moral disintegration, social disorganization, political discontinuity, and socio-economic disparity.” However, it is not at all clear that these terms can be substituted without loss of meaning. Within the latter categories, a strong and talented tyrant might be as good a solution as, if not actually preferable to, the Book of Mormon solution of repentance. Notice also that any suggestion of sin, moral responsibility, and alienation from God is absent from Quinn’s “secular terms.” From the point of view of Book of Mormon prophets, any explanation that excluded the sins, pride, and follies of the Nephites would be a blatant misunderstanding of the situation and the only real solution, repentance.

Quinn’s argument borders on the truly funny when he claims that Elder Packer’s suggestion for seeing the hand of the Lord in our history leads to “the Mormon equivalent of the Roman Catholic doctrine of papal infallibility” (p. 81). As if this were not enough, Quinn next appeals to the “LDS doctrine of free agency” to support his pluralistic history. He then leads us, not surprisingly, through “benignly angelic Church leaders,” “accommodation history” (p. 84), “cushioning evidence,” “a protective, paranoid approach” to our past (p. 85), and a “public relations defense” (p. 86). Quinn’s *reductio* has a flair for hyperbole, but it does not exceed what follows in his “Aftermath.”

The “Aftermath” recounts the persecution Quinn has suffered since delivering the original talk. Although advised against publishing “On Being a Mormon Historian,” Quinn cannot imagine that the reasons could be anything but personal.<sup>11</sup> Private conversations with deans, apostles, and students, some of them clearly based on hearsay, contain quotation marks (p. 92).

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<sup>11</sup> One good reason for not publishing this essay is the amount of nonsense it contains. I’ve indicated just a few of the reasons above: confusions over monistic and pluralistic history; misappropriating what is meant by the term “environmental;” confusions about “free agency.” These are only a partial list of reasons to withhold this essay from the public: it is largely an embarrassment for Michael Quinn.





Does Quinn possess notes he took of these conversations? Where is this material coming from?

Quinn portrays his “college dean,” the late Martin Hickman, as conveying persecution from General Authorities and later lamenting that practice. In the early 1980s, Dean Hickman held numerous conversations with those involved in what was then called “the Mormon history debate.”<sup>12</sup> Other reports of these conversations have also been published by “New Mormon Historians,” sometimes as a defense for their own actions, sometimes as an attempt to silence criticism.<sup>13</sup> Although it is difficult to determine exactly what may or may not have taken place in these meetings, especially since it is no longer possible simply to ask Dean Hickman, there is undoubtedly another side to this story which has yet to be told.

Quinn points out that the persecution involved attempted censoring of various manuscripts and that he lived in a “climate of repression.” Of course, “no one ever gave [him] an ultimatum or threatened to fire [him] from Brigham Young University,” but he resigned anyway (p. 93). The “extinction of free thought” at BYU made it “an Auschwitz of the mind” (p. 94). Quinn cannot provide a single example of any censorship other than people offering him their advice. But if he cannot see that their advice was in his best interest it is not their fault.<sup>14</sup> The

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<sup>12</sup> I heard one economics professor refer to it as “the black hole of Mormon history.”

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Hill, “Afterword,” 124. Hill asserts that I have questioned his faith in “Naturalistic Assumptions and the Book of Mormon.” Says Hill, “There is the problem of questioning the religious faith of myself and others which pervades the entire piece. There was a time when the dean of a certain college said that he would not allow anyone to question the faith of another faculty member.” That dean was, of course, Martin Hickman.

<sup>14</sup> Most of the advice appears, from my point of view, to have been sound. Quinn would have suffered less embarrassment if he had not published “On Being a Mormon Historian” and *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987). In *Early Mormonism* Quinn builds his argument from evidence which is tenuous at best (could Joseph, or anyone else for that matter in the 1820s, have had access to all the rare books from which Quinn draws?). Those interested in truly bizarre readings of the Book of Mormon should consult Quinn’s chapter on “Mormon Scriptures and the Magic World View.” For example:

Substituting the synonyms “occult” for “hid” (including “hidden” and “secret”) and “sorcery” for “work of darkness” may





hyperbole of Quinn's statements is obvious, but, at least as far as Auschwitz is concerned, Quinn should be careful not to trifle with serious matters.

Quinn makes it appear as though all attempts at censorship have been directed at historians and that they are merely the good guys representing free inquiry, scholarship, and first amendment rights. Thomas G. Alexander suggests the same thing.<sup>15</sup> There is another side to this question in which I have played a small part and which bears telling here.<sup>16</sup>

In May 1986, I delivered a paper at the meetings of the Mormon History Association titled "The Function of Naturalistic Terms in Environmental Explanations of the Book of Mormon." After the session, Lavina Fielding Anderson, then associate editor for *Dialogue*, requested that I submit the paper for publication, which I did. To make a long story short, for the next two years, *Dialogue* stalled and delayed publication. The most interesting comments came from the "blind referees." Although the paper had been delivered to them without an author's name, one came back with my name pencilled in at the top. One of the comment sheets referred to me by name. After

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help to bring into sharper focus for twentieth-century readers the meaning of many possibly euphemistic passages in the Book of Mormon. For example, substituting "occult" for "secret" is certainly truer to the parallel structure and contextual meaning of 2 Nephi 30:17: "There is nothing which is [occult] save it shall be revealed; there is no [sorcery] save it shall be made manifest in the light; and there is nothing which is [magically] sealed upon the earth save it shall be loosed." Even though it can have both positive and negative connotations, "occult," in present usage, is a better parallel than "secret" to "work of darkness," while the meaning of "occult" also correlates better with the magic dimensions of "sealed" in this verse. (p. 160)

Who in the 1830s read the Book of Mormon this way? Is it not curious that no one seems to have left a record in which this understanding of the Book of Mormon is plain? If I am allowed to substitute any words I want in the Book of Mormon text, it is easy to make it say what I want and easy to support any thesis. Quinn goes on to say that some of his word substitutions provide "a more precise reading in the language of the 1830s."

<sup>15</sup> Alexander, "Historiography," 44–45.

<sup>16</sup> This is the story that I know best. There are, not surprisingly, other tales of censorship instigated by those who champion "New Mormon History."





the two years without a commitment to publish, I finally gave up on publishing the essay in *Dialogue*.<sup>17</sup>

In 1990 *BYU Studies* agreed to publish my essay, now titled “Naturalistic Assumptions and the Book of Mormon.”<sup>18</sup> Well after the essay was refereed and accepted for publication, it once again ran into trouble. Apparently, in the view of some, the essay contained “controversial material.” Since a portion of the essay dealt with some of the work of BYU History Professor Marvin Hill, he was permitted to read the essay and apparently made attempts to block its publication. After some delay, I was informed that it had “been clear to the board of trustees and back.” After the BYU board of trustees (the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles) had approved the essay for publication, there was still a matter of language being added to the essay to soften my criticism of Hill’s position. Fortunately, the editors of *BYU Studies* were very flexible and we were able to work through all the areas of difficulties. It seems “New Mormon Historians,” whatever their virtues, are not above attempting censorship when it is in their self-interest to do so.<sup>19</sup>

The issue of censorship is largely a smokescreen and has little to do with the theoretical issues involved with objective Mormon history. The real point of Michael Quinn’s story is to let readers know who the good guys (historians, mostly) and bad guys (apostles, mostly) are in his story. In my story I’ve reversed the good guys and bad guys. The good guys (apostles, the BYU board of trustees) allow publication of my paper; the bad guys (historians) attempt censorship. One of the troubling aspects of Quinn’s story is that things always appear to be “just happening to him.” He does not appear to view anything that happens as the consequence of his own actions.

Although Malcolm R. Thorp’s “Some Reflections on New Mormon History and the Possibilities of a ‘New’ Traditional History” is a more sophisticated defense of the “New Mormon History” than Quinn’s, it suffers many of the same faults. Thorp attempts to soften criticism of environmental explanations

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<sup>17</sup> I have, of course, saved all the correspondence from this small adventure and will no doubt make all of the materials available to a university archive sometime in the future.

<sup>18</sup> Gary F. Novak, “Naturalistic Assumptions and the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies* 30/3 (Summer 1990): 23–40.

<sup>19</sup> Marvin Hill’s response to my essay can be found in his “Afterword,” 117–24.





of the founding events (p. 267) and praises what he calls “historical pluralism” (p. 270). Thorp also attempts to deal with some of the hermeneutical literature and its seeming relevance to historical interpretation.

Like Quinn, Thorp softens what is usually meant by “environmental explanations.” For Thorp, “Mormonism did not arise *in vacuo*. It has always been seen as part of the American religious experience” (p. 267). As I have already explained, placing Mormonism in some kind of historical context does not, by itself, constitute an environmental explanation. According to Thorp, “To argue that Mormonism can be understood only through its own language, categories, and truth claims denies all possibilities of rational discussion” (p. 267). Like Quinn, Thorp suggests that categories like “millenarianism, seeker, identity crisis, myth, primitivism and even magic are not indigenous to Mormonism but are used by a wide variety of scholars, including traditionalist” (p. 267). While some of these terms are borrowed from some of the early Saints (seeker and primitivist), certainly neither Joseph Smith nor Wilford Woodruff saw themselves as being involved in mysticism or as having an identity crisis. This does not begin to get at the argument that identity crises can serve as an explanation for revelation.<sup>20</sup> Again we can see the scholarly categories subtly changing the meaning of the language of revelation and the texts in which it is found.

Like Thomas G. Alexander, Thorp attempts to deflect criticism of the objectivist (or positivist) strain running through New Mormon History by appealing to historicism.<sup>21</sup> His strong historicist influence can be seen in some of his generalizations. According to Thorp, the writings of Wilford Woodruff, Orson F. Whitney, B. H. Roberts, and others, “like all historical writings, . . . reflect the age in which they were written . . .” (p. 269). This is a fine example of the historicist assumption that all texts are

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<sup>20</sup> For arguments in which the stress of an identity crisis serves as an explanation of revelation, see Thomas G. Alexander, “Wilford Woodruff and the Changing Nature of Mormon Religious Experience,” *Church History* 45 (March 1976): 57–58, and Leonard J. Arrington and Davis Bitton, *The Mormon Experience* (New York: Knopf, 1979), 16–19. If Joseph’s revelations are simply his response to some deep emotional or environmental stress or conflict, then they reveal folly, though perhaps sincere, and not God’s words to man.

<sup>21</sup> Alexander, “Historiography,” 31–36.





the product of their time and therefore—at least to the degree they are historically conditioned—simply not true. Part of the calling of a prophet, it seems to me, is to stand outside of and apart from his culture and time and proclaim God’s word. The historicist assumption that no one is able to be freed from his own culture begs an important question. Everything that occurs during an “age,” a “period,” is held to be typical of that period. By definition, nothing is allowed to be atypical. One clearly sees this kind of question begging demonstrated in the claim that the Book of Mormon is a typical product of its culture. If that were the case, we ought to be able to produce other similar texts of its kind from the 1830s.

Thorp’s claim that “all language is essentially naturalistic (evolutionary) and historically situated” is also problematic (p. 272). When historians or their critics call an explanation “naturalistic” they are referring to a certain kind of explanation, one in which divine involvement in human affairs is excluded from the explanation while psychological, social science, and economic explanations are included. Thorp is confused when he claims that “the use of secular vocabulary does not necessarily presuppose any ontological grounds for belief or disbelief” (p. 272). Naturalistic explanations of the foundation events, the Book of Mormon or Joseph’s prophetic charisms, are precisely those which exclude the divine from the explanation. The language of naturalistic explanations clearly provides an ontological ground for belief or unbelief, depending on how the story is told, with what assumptions, and in what categories and terms.

Part of Thorp’s confusion clearly arises from the way in which he reads texts. As a footnote to the paragraph from which I have drawn the above language, Thorp claims:

A good example of such thinking is provided by Gary F. Novak, who in assessing Marvin S. Hill’s studies on early Mormon origins, has “discovered” hidden sources of “atheism” in Hill’s remarks. . . . Rather than atheism, such lines of reasoning can only be described as a *non sequitur*. (pp. 278–79)

Marvin Hill would also agree with much of Thorp’s assessment.<sup>22</sup> But did I actually claim to “discover” anything in Hill’s essays? I am not sure why Thorp placed the word “discover” in quotations since the word never occurs in my es-

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<sup>22</sup> Hill, “Afterword,” 117–24.





say. As for accusing Hill of “atheism,” the word “atheist” occurs but once and then when I quote Dale L. Morgan’s assessment of his own position in a section of the essay that deals solely with Morgan’s discussion of naturalistic explanations.<sup>23</sup> In fact I was careful to indicate the ways in which Hill distinguished his work from the kind of history done by Morgan and Brodie.<sup>24</sup> I did suggest that Hill’s work shared some of the naturalistic vocabulary of Morgan and Fawn Brodie and therefore shared some particulars of the question-begging involved in that language. But as for “hidden sources of ‘atheism,’ ” go figure!

Thorp grants that “Bohn is correct in his assertion that New Mormon Historians use the vocabulary of secular historiography and the underlying language of modern social sciences. But what other possibilities are there?” (p. 273). Certainly Thorp can think of other possibilities. History has not always been written using the “language of modern social sciences.” Indeed, most of the really good history is written without borrowing the language and categories of the social sciences. The scriptures themselves, as Richard Bushman suggests, could provide one such model. Bushman also suggests other possibilities (pp. 8–15). Only a historicism lapsed into forgetfulness could suggest that the modern social sciences can provide the only competent model for writing history.

Clearly the worst portion of Thorp’s essay is his attempt to deal with recent hermeneutic literature, particularly that by Hans-Georg Gadamer. One example will suffice, though others could be added. According to Thorp, “the purpose of hermeneutics is to make dialogical discussions possible between scholars of differing interests and approaches” (p. 274). This mistaken understanding of hermeneutics is almost as bad as Thomas Alexander’s misappropriation of Gilbert Ryle’s “category mistake.”<sup>25</sup> According to David E. Linge’s introduction to

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<sup>23</sup> “Naturalistic Assumptions,” 25.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>25</sup> See Alexander, “Historiography and the New Mormon History,” 26. Alexander complains about critics of the “New Mormon History” using the word “positivist” to describe “New Mormon Historians.” “In so doing,” claimed Alexander, “they have . . . fallen into what British philosopher Gilbert Ryle called a ‘category mistake.’ ” Has Alexander correctly understood Ryle’s “category mistake”? Alexander quotes Ryle several times, but does not seem to understand that Ryle is criticizing the Cartesian





Gadamer's *Philosophical Hermeneutics* "the task of hermeneutics . . . is ontological rather than methodological. It seeks to throw light on the fundamental conditions that underlie the phenomenon of understanding in all its modes."<sup>26</sup> Hermeneutics seeks to uncover and make plain the ontological grounds and fundamental conditions of understanding, not to "make dialogical discussions possible between scholars." Thorp's narrow understanding of philosophical hermeneutics mars his entire essay.

Whatever the faults of Quinn's and Thorp's attempts to defend the "New Mormon History," they are positively bullet-proof when compared to Edward H. Ashment's "Historicity of the Canon." Those who would defend "New Mormon History," objectivity, historicism, environmental explanations, or naturalistic assumptions will have to find ways to divorce and distance themselves from Ashment's views. This essay, easily the worst in the entire book, may go some way toward halting the progress of the discussion.

Ashment's essay begins quaintly enough as an attempt to examine Joseph Smith's efforts to correct and enlarge the canon of scripture (pp. 281–83). But any issues Ashment identifies in this connection are clearly ancillary to his main purpose, which is to provide a defense of objectivism and historicism, as he un-

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conception of mind—the "ghost in the machine." The "facts of mental life" which Alexander quotes, do not refer to intellectual categories like "positivism," but rather to the Cartesian mind-body dualism. Ryle gives several good examples of category mistakes. One will suffice:

The same mistake would be made by a child witnessing the march-past of a division, who, having had pointed out to him such and such battalions, batteries, squadrons, etc., asked when the division was going to appear. He would be supposing that a division was a counterpart to the units already seen, partly similar to them and partly unlike them. (Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984]: 16.)

Apparently all Alexander meant to indicate was that critics of the "New Mormon History" are mistaken in applying the label "positivism" to some of the "New Mormon History." Whatever else it may be, it is clearly not a category mistake. Oddly, a few pages later, Alexander identifies a "secularist" strain of the "New Mormon History" which has attempted to move it "toward positivism"; Alexander, "Historiography," 31.

<sup>26</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. and ed. by David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), xi.





derstands them, against the criticisms of Louis Midgley, Alan Goff, and myself. Curiously, David Bohn, usually a target of such attacks, is not even mentioned.<sup>27</sup>

According to Ashment,

The apologetic formulation of the relevant questions frames the issue in an impossible way. It requires presuppositions which would automatically disqualify any historical inquiry and thereby nullify conclusions that historical analysis might arrive at. As one scholar has explained, it represents “an attempt to resolve a nonempirical problem by empirical means” by “framing . . . a question which cannot be resolved before the researcher settles some central metaphysical problem.” In other words, one must first answer the question “Was Joseph Smith a prophet of God?” before historical research can proceed. (p. 283)

Has Ashment understood the critique of objectivism sufficiently and the insights into understanding and explanation offered by hermeneutics? If he had, his objectivist objections would have largely disappeared. I have argued elsewhere<sup>28</sup> that all understanding involves preunderstandings of one kind or another. These preunderstandings include not only our formal assumptions that we can clearly articulate, but also informal assumptions that we often cannot articulate—assumptions built into our language and the very way in which we view the world. Given this, then the categories and assumptions, even the very way we frame and tell our story of Joseph Smith, will in some way answer the question “Was Joseph Smith a prophet of God?” That question may or may not be prior to the historian’s

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<sup>27</sup> Ashment is clearly upset about Louis Midgley’s review of *The Word of God*; Louis Midgley, “More Revisionist Legerdemain and the Book of Mormon,” *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 3 (1991): 261–311. Midgley pointed out many of Ashment’s sins: his naive use of sources, his silly attack on the Book of Abraham, his poor attempts at answering Nibley’s arguments supporting the Book of Abraham, and his unsophisticated understanding of historical method. At least some of the tone of Ashment’s essay may be attributed to his annoyance at Midgley. Midgley’s comments on Ashment can be found on pages 282–95 of “More Revisionist Legerdemain.”

<sup>28</sup> “Naturalistic Assumptions,” 23–24.





research, but it absolutely cannot be avoided very far along in the process.

Ashment's warhorse positivism pervades the examples he brings to support his case. He complains that "many believers doubt the historicity of such 'stories of floating axes, . . . blood raining from heaven . . .'" etc., "but insist absolutely that the unique event of the resurrection of Jesus is a historical 'fact'" (p. 284). According to Ashment, "that 'fact' is really a conclusion which does not follow from the usual historiographic methodology," whatever that is, "of collecting data and arguing from generalizations based on consistently observed data" (p. 284). I wonder what "consistently observed data" Ashment is thinking of? I suppose he has some generalization in mind like "dead bodies do not come back to life," but he still needs to explain the texts which witness that Jesus was dead but rose again. This is not, as he says, a "unique event," but one which has over a dozen witnesses in the Gospels alone and more witnesses outside of the Gospels.

Ashment's problem with the resurrection, however, is not his real target. His real complaint is with the Book of Mormon. Mormons, he claims, may "doubt the historicity of such claims as non-tarnishing, forever incorruptible brass plates anachronistically representing an already established Old Testament canon; . . . shining stones in ancient semi-submarines; a magic compass," and my personal favorite, "botanically unverifiable animals" (p. 284). Botanically unverifiable animals? Ashment himself is probably botanically unverifiable. Although after reading this essay, perhaps there are good reasons to believe that Ashment himself does not really exist.

Ashment's reading of the Book of Mormon text is crude at best. Ashment claims to find in it an "already established Old Testament canon." Has he read the Book of Mormon? The list of prophets known to Book of Mormon prophets was larger than our current Old Testament. Where did they get the writings of Zenos and Zenock if not from the brass plates? What makes Ashment think the brass plates are "forever incorruptible?" There are many ancient examples of brass, copper, and bronze that have survived to modern times. Ashment's anti-Mormon bias more than clouds his reading of the relevant texts.

Ashment's understanding of historical methodology is similarly naive. He quotes Van Harvey saying that the historian's "method should be completely free from any value judgement" (p. 285). As should be clear from the above samples, Ashment's





own attempts at history possess more than a few “value judgements.” In any case, it is surprising to see anyone give lip service to value-free history anymore. Can even Ashment really believe in value-free history?

Ashment goes on to quote my claim that the scriptural chronicles do not contain anything like an appeal to “facts” (p. 286). My reason for so doing was to point out that appeals to “facts,” “the evidence,” “the record,” and the like are symptoms of objectivism (positivism) and historicism. The scriptures themselves can provide alternative models for doing history which avoid the problems of objectivism and historicism. How well does Ashment read the text? He begins, “In other words,” which should indicate that he is paraphrasing what I said. Read carefully:

In other words, by submitting the Book of Mormon and the Book of Abraham to historical inquiry, historiography reduces their claims of uniqueness to the same level on which Mormons have already placed the unique claims of the rest of Christianity and other world religions, which they do not consider to be inspired. (p. 286)

“In other words”? How does Ashment draw this out of my argument? “Claims of uniqueness”? Ashment has once again found his favorite straw man punching bags, the Book of Mormon and Book of Abraham, and has something called “historiography” reducing their claims of uniqueness, whatever that means. How does historiography reduce or even do anything?

But the very next sentence really takes the cake. It begins, “For an objectivist apologist such as Midgley . . .” Midgley an apologist for objectivism? Quinn and Thorp have made no mistakes about this question. As evidenced from the very first days of the new “crisis in Mormon historiography,” Midgley has always been and been perceived as a critic of objectivism. Ashment’s statement is no one-time mistake, for on the very next page Ashment describes what he calls Midgley’s “objectivist view” (p. 287).

According to Ashment, “because they have objectivistically,” whatever that means, “identified their own perspective so completely with what is ‘True’ ” (do not miss the capital letter because it must be very important), “they sometimes regard alternative perspectives as attacks against that truth and their advo-





cates as deluded and enemies of God” (p. 287). More hyperbole. The only note close to this quotation identifies Midgley’s “More Revisionist Legerdemain” as the source. But it is impossible to find anything like this on page 291 of Midgley’s review, nor, for that matter, in his entire essay. Ashment is apparently upset that Midgley mocked his handling of historical method.

Ashment proceeds to provide a summary of Van Harvey’s old arguments, which he thinks answers the criticism of objectivism and historicism in Mormon history. But since Ashment’s handling of texts and positions does not improve, there is little sense in continuing. One more laugh, however, is in order. Near the end of his essay, Ashment claims:

After basing their case against historiography on relativism, apologists argue positivistically that their own perspective “is the true one because it enables us to see the facts as they really are,” and their conclusion is not based on empirical argument but on faith and revelation. (p. 292)

The note is again to Harvey. But what is the “case against historiography?” Who has ever argued against historiography? Who has ever argued “that their own perspective ‘is the true one because it enables us to see the facts as they really are?’” And who based his argument on “faith and revelation?” Does Ashment even read those he criticizes?

In the spirit of the list Ashment provides on page 290, I would like to offer the following observations of Paul Feyerabend:

First thesis: Rational discourse is only one way of presenting and examining an issue and by no means the best. Our new intellectuals are not aware of its limitations and of the nature of the things outside.

Second thesis: Although our new intellectuals extol the virtue of a rational debate they only rarely conform to its rules. For example, they don’t read what they criticize and their understanding of arguments is of the most primitive kind.

Third thesis: Historical studies are treated in a summary fashion or are altogether neglected even when they constitute the core of an argument.

Fourth thesis: Confronted with a challenge to basic beliefs (such as the belief that science excels above





all other ways of understanding and mastering the world) our new intellectuals usually recite standard phrases from the rationalist breviary without argument. The more fundamental the challenge, the more sonorous the recitation.<sup>29</sup>

Most of these can be applied to Ashment's essay without modification and to Quinn and Thorp with only slight modification.

The very best essays in the book are those by Richard Bushman, Martin Marty, Louis Midgley, and David Bohn. Marty identifies a "crisis in Mormon historiography" which "has to do with the challenge of modern historical consciousness and criticism" (p. 169). He identifies the sources of that crisis and begins to explore the ways in which some Mormon historians and historians of Mormonism have made accommodations to that crisis. Louis Midgley's "The Acids of Modernity and the Crisis in Mormon Historiography" is a response to Marty's essay. Midgley builds and expands on the foundation laid by Marty. These essays, when carefully and sympathetically read, provide an excellent introduction to the debate concerning objectivity, objectivism, historicism, and naturalistic and environmental explanations of Mormonism's founding texts.

David Bohn's "Unfounded Claims and Impossible Expectations: A Critique of New Mormon History" is a combination of "No Higher Ground," "The Burden of Proof," and "Our Own Agenda." In addition, Bohn has also responded to Malcolm Thorp's criticisms of his earlier work. Bohn's essay is useful, if for no other reason, for reading what the most criticized and maligned critic of New Mormon History actually has to say.

One of the most frustrating things about *Faithful History* is that, with the exception of Louis Midgley's essay, references to articles published in the book are always to the original article. With modern computer technology, it should have been easy for Signature Books to provide the correct references to articles published in this volume. With a few exceptions, Signature has performed a service by collecting these essays in a single location. If you are interested in the current debate about historiography, you should probably purchase your copy of *Faithful History* quickly. It is not likely to remain in print for long.

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<sup>29</sup> Paul Feyerabend, *Science in a Free Society* (London: Verso Editions/NLB, 1978): 184–90 (emphasis in original).

