

*Mapping Mormon Issues*

# MAPPING BOOK OF MORMON HISTORICITY DEBATES—PART II

## PERSPECTIVES FROM THE SOCIOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE

*By John-Charles Duffy*

**I**N PART ONE OF THIS FRAMING ARTICLE, PUBLISHED in the October 2008 issue of *SUNSTONE*, I provided an overview of the history, the arguments, and the positions that constitute the ongoing Book of Mormon historicity debates. Intelligent people have reached a variety of conclusions around this question, with credentialed scholars arguing both for and against the Book of Mormon's being an authentic ancient record. In this second part of the article, I take up the question: How can people arrive at opposing conclusions about historicity? Why do arguments that apologists find overwhelming strike skeptics as negligible, and vice-versa?

To answer those questions requires a theoretical discussion about the nature of knowing. But there is much more at stake in this discussion than theory. For someone who is trying to decide what to believe about Book of Mormon historicity—for someone, that is, who is rethinking his or her faith—understanding how other people faced with the same arguments can reach vastly different conclusions is not merely a theoretical concern. For someone in that situation, the question “How can people reach such different conclusions from all these argu-

ments?” becomes the same as asking, “How am I supposed to decide what to conclude from all these arguments?” Thus a theoretical question—“How do people know?”—leads us to the human dimension of the historicity debates.

My discussion of this question draws on theories developed within the field of sociology of knowledge. Sociology of knowledge is an effort to identify the social processes by which groups and individuals develop, maintain, or alter their beliefs. Applying sociological theories to the Book of Mormon historicity debates reveals that the debates follow typical, even predictable, patterns. A sociological perspective expands our field of vision beyond the arguments themselves, highlighting the social and cultural influences that shape individuals' thinking about historicity. A sociological perspective also draws our attention to the consequences of these arguments: the ways the arguments work to challenge or reinforce social relationships, boundaries, and identities. In other words, the sociology of knowledge shows us how our beliefs about Book of Mormon historicity affect and are affected by our relationships with others.

A fundamental premise of the sociology of knowledge is the notion that reality is socially constructed. This notion has affinities to philosopher Thomas Kuhn's concept of “paradigm shifts” in science. Because Kuhn's ideas have been invoked in debates about Book of Mormon historicity, they offer a useful starting point for understanding the social construction of reality. Kuhn (1970) argues that science, contrary to what its



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practitioners claim, is never simply a question of assessing how well theories account for the known facts, since more than one theory can always be applied to a given set of data. Which theory will prove more persuasive to the scientific community depends on the paradigm—the underlying assumptions, beliefs, values, and methodological preferences—that prevails in the community at a given moment in history. And paradigms, Kuhn maintains, are embraced or rejected for non-scientific reasons ranging from personal idiosyncrasies to social influences such as reputation or national prestige. Some LDS apologists have invoked Kuhn's concept of paradigms to relativize criticisms of historicity that claim the authority of science. That is, apologists cite Kuhn to argue that scientific "truth" is neither immutable nor value-neutral because it depends on nonscientific assumptions and biases (Nibley 1986, pp. 119–20; Christensen 1995; for a skeptic's response, see Vogel 2005).

My sociological discussion of the historicity debates makes a similar argument: that people's theories, or beliefs, about historicity rest on nonscientific, or nonintellectual, considerations. However, in the discussion that follows, I will rely not on Kuhn (a physicist and philosopher) but on two classics from the sociology of knowledge: Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* (1967) and James Borhek and Richard Curtis's *A Sociology of Belief* (1975). I will also draw on work by literary theorist Stanley Fish (1980) and semiotician Umberto Eco (1990) to show how socially constructed norms of interpretation shape the ways that apologists and skeptics decide what counts as plausible evidence for or against Book of Mormon historicity.

The message of this part of the article is that beliefs about Book of Mormon historicity are fundamentally social, not intellectual, in their origin. Your beliefs about historicity are a function of your relationships with other people, in and out of the Church. This means that conclusions about historicity are not reached simply by weighing the arguments, though it probably seems to people who are working through doubts that this is what they are doing. Rather deciding what to believe about historicity is fundamentally a matter of deciding where one stands most comfortably in relation to LDS and non-LDS communities. It means deciding which relationships and affiliations are most important to you. To what extent this sociological perspective is actually useful for someone grappling with the historicity question is debatable, but it certainly has a relativizing effect that tends to weaken the force of some arguments about historicity.

## SOCIOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE

### KEY CONCEPTS

*Socialization and the politics of truth-making.* Central to the sociology of knowledge is the idea that reality is socially constructed. The world we inhabit is the world as we understand it, and that understanding is neither a simple reflection of things as they are nor a product of purely individual percep-

tion. Rather, our understanding of reality arises from our relationships with others. What we think of as reality is a human invention—or, to put it differently, a social convention: conventional ways of seeing and thinking which take on the appearance of nature to those who have internalized them. This is not to deny that there is a real world "out there" independent of the understandings we have constructed; but this does mean that the methods we use to ascertain the nature of the world "out there" are themselves a matter of social convention. Scientific methods, for example, are not self-evident techniques for discerning the nature of the world but rather are the reality-constructing techniques preferred by particular groups. In modern societies, groups that favor the scientific worldview have become highly influential, but other groups, at other times or places or occupying more marginal positions on the modern social landscape, have different preferences (certain religious fundamentalists, for example).

As social constructions, beliefs are a dimension of culture, and we internalize them in the same way we internalize culture. To adopt a particular set of beliefs is to be socialized in a particular way—that is, to be incorporated into particular social relationships. For example, being taught to believe in evolution also means being taught to submit to the authority that evolutionary scientists claim for determining what counts as truth in modern societies. If you are a Latter-day Saint who believes in evolution, then that belief implies setting yourself apart from Saints who believe that the scriptures rule out evolution and who may therefore regard you as not entirely sound in your faith. Conversely, not believing in evolution means adopting a more or less oppositional stance toward various truth-making institutions in American society, from public schools, to museums, to PBS and the Discovery Channel. Inculcating beliefs includes signaling where believers stand in relation to nonbelievers and what attitudes they should adopt toward nonbelievers. For example: "Scientists believe in evolution; but the restored gospel gives us greater light than they have." Or: "People who reject evolution do so out of irrational prejudice, which makes them a dangerous influence in society." Or: "You and I disagree about evolution because we interpret the scriptures differently. Church members don't have to agree about everything."

Borhek and Curtis (1975) maintain that when a group or individual opts for a particular belief system, they do so because "the belief system adopted is more rewarding in some way than the ones rejected or not selected" (p. 95). Mention of rewards discloses the political aspect of social construction. When parties make competing claims about reality, they are not only "seeing" or "thinking" differently; they are pursuing competing interests: authority, status, material benefits. And a consensus in favor of one belief system over a competitor is always attained as a political triumph. To return to the example of evolution: Evolutionary science has not been endowed with the authority of truth in modern societies simply because, as its advocates believe, it is the best explanation for the data. Being right, after all, is no guarantee of being accepted. What happened, rather, is that evolutionary scientists, for a variety of



historically specific reasons—including their having marshaled scientific evidence that proved persuasive to people who were in a position to make a difference—have gained and retained the support of elite truth-making institutions such as academia, the courts, and the public schools (though the schools remain a site of perennial contest). If evolution's critics were ever able to oust it from its position of privilege, this victory would be the result of their own political and rhetorical successes.

*Plausibility structures.* A person fully socialized into a given belief would find it unthinkable that someone could believe otherwise. However, socialization is never total, especially in a pluralistic society where we frequently interact with people who hold beliefs different from ours. Socialization is especially problematic for groups whose beliefs put them in a minority and who are therefore at a social disadvantage. Consequently, “every viable society” or subgroup “must develop procedures

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of reality-maintenance” (Berger and Luckmann 1967, p. 147). The most important of these, according to Berger and Luckmann, is “continual and consistent” conversation with others who share your beliefs (p. 154). Such conversation builds up around you a universe of discourse

where these beliefs are affirmed as sensible and normal.

The relationships within which this conversation occurs are called a “plausibility structure” because these relationships provide a social base that reinforces group members’ sense of the plausibility of the group’s construction of reality. As long as this social base is the site of your primary relationships, you can readily sustain commitment to the group’s beliefs despite having secondary relationships with nonbelievers. For example, if those closest to you (your family and friends) believe in Book of Mormon historicity, that belief is likely to remain plausible to you even if you know that most of the people you interact with (non-LDS teachers, co-workers, acquaintances)

find the belief incredible. However, if your connection to the plausibility structure is weakened—that is, if relationships with nonbelievers start to compete for primacy—then your commitment to the group’s beliefs is likely to be weakened as well. You will tend to believe what the people closest to you believe, and the more time you spend conversing with other people about their beliefs, the more plausible their beliefs will become to you.

These principles are supported by sociological studies of religious conversion and defection. Studies show that converts establish strong interpersonal ties with members of a religious group before they come to espouse the group’s beliefs. (This is certainly not news to the LDS Missionary Department; hence the Church’s emphases on member-missionary work and fellowshipping investigators.) Conversely, members who defect and disavow the group’s beliefs usually do so after something else happens that leads them to become less active in the group or to feel less solidarity with other members (Snow and Machalek 1984; Bromley 2004). A set of LDS sociologists (Albrecht, Cornwall, and Cunningham 1988) made this observation in connection with a study of inactive and former Mormons. The “vast majority” of disaffiliated Mormons, the LDS sociologists found, “had always been somewhat marginal in the church” (p. 73). The sociologists concluded:

Difficulties with church doctrines do not play a major role in the process of disaffiliation. . . . It appeared that disaffiliated Mormons were rejecting the norms of Mormonism much more than the doctrines of Mormonism. . . . Doctrinal disagreements may very well become a useful tool for describing why one has problems with a particular church, but they are not particularly helpful in understanding the disaffiliation process. (pp. 76–77, 79)

It should be noted that we are dealing here with general principles and trends; these statements will not hold for every individual case. The general principle, however, is that sharing or rejecting a group’s beliefs is the outcome of the quality of a person’s relationships within the group.

Groups have adopted a variety of strategies to protect their plausibility structures and thus to prevent members from losing faith. Groups may employ some form of what Borhek and Curtis call “encapsulation,” minimizing members’ contact with people or information from outside the plausibility structure. Or groups may encourage “entanglement,” tying members’ identities and personal integrity to the group’s beliefs through practices such as bearing public testimony. Another way members can preserve beliefs in the face of outside challenge, according to Berger and Luckmann, is to compartmentalize, temporarily setting aside their primary reality to take up a secondary reality for strictly instrumental purposes in settings such as school or work.

In addition to challenges from outside the group, plausibility structures can also be destabilized from the inside. If some members of a group advocate a construction of reality that competes with the official construction, then institutions whose legitimacy depends on the official reality are likely to re-

sort to “repressive procedures” to neutralize the heretics’ threat. On the other hand, because socialization is never total, there will always be “idiosyncratic variations in the way [group members] conceive of the universe,” which can be tolerated as long as they do not challenge the legitimacy of the reigning institutions (Berger and Luckmann, pp. 106–07).

#### *Applications to Book of Mormon historicity*

THESE SOCIOLOGICAL THEORIES imply that a person’s beliefs about Book of Mormon historicity are not decided by “a purely cerebral process” (Borhek and Curtis, p. 123). Indeed, given the sheer volume of arguments for and against historicity, it would strain credulity for someone to claim that their beliefs are purely the result of having considered all the relevant evidence. Besides, as discussed later, even the criteria by which a person weighs the evidence, or even a person’s perception of what counts as evidence to be weighed, is a product of prior socialization.

Instead, beliefs about historicity are a factor of social relationships—specifically the intensity of a person’s identification with the Church and its dominant culture as compared to identification with other social groups. Belief in Book of Mormon historicity is the product of socialization into orthodox LDS plausibility structures. That is, people believe in historicity because they are primarily committed to other people who believe in historicity. Conversely, a Latter-day Saint who comes to doubt historicity has moved his or her primary identifications away from the LDS Church, or at least away from the orthodox majority and the hierarchy, to other social groups whose construction of reality does not include Book of Mormon historicity. When apologists insinuate that revisionists have shifted their loyalties from the Church to the world (Bitton 1994; Gee 1994; Midgley 1994), they are, in one sense, correct.

*Academic socialization and Book of Mormon apologetics.* One form of socialization that pressures Latter-day Saints to shift their commitments away from Book of Mormon historicity is higher education. Apologists from B. H. Roberts (1985) to the present (Reynolds 1997) have expressed special concern for persuading young people of the credibility of the Book of Mormon’s historical claims. This concern makes sense in light of the concept of plausibility structures. Young Latter-day Saints going off to college are likely to attenuate their ties to family and their home wards at the same time they may forge new relationships with nonbelievers, including potentially influential student-teacher relationships. If that happens, their LDS beliefs will come to seem less plausible. Daniel Peterson (2000b) has described how his relationship with a Catholic teacher, while studying abroad in Cairo, gave him a “feeling of inferiority” and made LDS claims seem “improbable” (p. xxxi). Another apologist, Lance Starr (2001), describes how he felt attacked in his faith when he left home to go to college; Starr credits “a strong support system,” including his relationship with his institute teacher, with helping him retain his LDS beliefs.

Whether they are professional academics or lay intellectuals who have internalized academic constructions of reality through their education, Latter-day Saints who have been socialized into the academy can react in a number of ways to the pressure this socialization places on Book of Mormon historicity. Some who find participation in academic intellectual culture more rewarding than participation in LDS networks will leave the Church. Those who come to disbelieve historicity yet who remain committed to other aspects of LDS culture will seek ways to justify remaining active in the Church, such as reconceiving the Book of Mormon as nonhistorical scripture or championing Mormon social and ethical values. Others will seek to reconcile Book of Mormon historicity with academic constructions of reality; this is the approach that apologists take when they deploy scientific evidence or critical scholarship to support historicity. Some observers believe that Blake Ostler's expansion theory is becoming increasingly attractive to LDS intellectuals (Givens 2002, pp. 173–74). If so, this is probably because the theory makes concessions to both believers' and nonbelievers' readings of the Book of Mormon—yes, there are parallels to antiquity; yes, there are also parallels to Smith's environment—and thus seems to allow LDS intellectuals to operate both in the Church and in nonbelieving academic communities.

Apologists' academic socialization is secondary to their LDS socialization; nevertheless, apologists are sensitive to how they are perceived by non-LDS academic colleagues. Hence orthodox scholars have been keen to participate in projects that imply recognition of their competence by outsiders, such as assisting the translation and publication of the Dead Sea Scrolls. For the same reason, some orthodox scholars are encouraged when non-Mormon scholars occasionally show signs that they have been persuaded to take LDS claims about the Book of Mormon seriously (Reynolds 1999; Tvedtnes 2001; Underwood 2006). Simultaneously, though, orthodox scholars actively resist dominant modes of truth-making in their disciplines. We see this when John Sorenson champions diffusionism against the skepticism of those whom he derisively calls "Big Scholars" (1994, 2005) or when LDS apologists join evangelicals in denouncing the naturalistic assumptions that now dominate biblical studies (Robinson 1989; Millet 1993; Anderson 1994). Resisting dominant constructions of reality in this way is most feasible for scholars who are employed at BYU, where they enjoy both an orthodox plausibility structure and protection of their livelihood.

Still, even with that kind of plausibility structure in place, orthodox LDS intellectuals represent a marginalized view within the academic discourse communities into which they have been socialized. They must therefore work hard to maintain their belief in Book of Mormon historicity. The ceaseless output of apologetics and other forms of orthodox scholarship serves this need. To use Berger and Luckmann's term, orthodox intellectuals must engage in frequent "conversation" with other believers to maintain their sense of the plausibility of their beliefs. Today LDS intellectuals have many ways of keeping themselves immersed in a universe of discourse where

Book of Mormon historicity is affirmed: conferences or fire-sides organized by FARMS and FAIR, online forums, the reading of orthodox Book of Mormon scholarship in a receptive frame of mind. In fact, one could argue—however counterintuitive it might seem—that the dramatic increase in books, periodicals, websites, and conferences supporting historicity over the past 20–25 years signals the extent to which many Latter-day Saints have been assimilated into *non*-LDS plausibility structures. Orthodox LDS intellectuals must work to surround themselves with discourse reaffirming Book of Mormon historicity precisely because they spend so much of their time engaged with other plausibility structures where historicity is not affirmed (such as the disciplinary communities into which they were socialized through their educations). If Mormons were more culturally isolated, they would not need to practice such vigorous reality maintenance.

Those who come to disbelieve Book of Mormon historicity must work to maintain their constructions of reality as well. Skeptics have their own forums for conversation—their own plausibility-reinforcing networks—ranging from the online forum Recovery from Mormonism to Jerald and Sandra Tanner's Utah Lighthouse Ministry. Frequent conversation about "how we know the Book of Mormon is not historical" will be most important for skeptics who feel marginalized within or excluded from the Church but who simultaneously retain significant relationships to orthodox Latter-day Saints, such as close ties to LDS family or living in a predominantly LDS community. This is true for the same reason that the continual production of Book of Mormon apologetics is important to orthodox intellectuals who have been socialized into academia: in both cases, believers have to exert themselves to maintain their reality against the influence of competing plausibility structures. Thus the phenomenon of people who "leave the Church, but . . . cannot leave the Church alone" (Maxwell 1996, p. 68) belongs to the same genus as "apoloaholics" who stay up late into the night writing extended, vigorous critiques of the latest challenge to Book of Mormon historicity (Ash 2001).

There is, however, a crucial asymmetry in play. Although skeptics of Book of Mormon historicity suffer the disadvantages of being a minority within LDS communities, orthodox believers are a minority in the larger society. Consequently, there are many, many more plausibility structures that support skeptics than there are that support the orthodox. This fact offers a sociological explanation for why apologists invest more energy in responding to skeptics than skeptics do in responding to apologists. Skeptics enjoy much greater social support for their beliefs than apologists do, especially when the debate is pursued according to conventions of academic argument, since apologists have the disadvantage of being a minority in the academy. Simply put, apologists are on the defensive. Skeptics, by contrast, can feel that they have adequately responded to the apologists with relatively little effort because they can more easily imagine non-LDS audiences nodding along with them in agreement. The cards of public

opinion are stacked in the skeptics' favor, at least outside LDS church settings.

*Empirical evidence and the social validation of belief.* In their analysis of the social processes by which beliefs are validated, Borhek and Curtis identify "empirical relevance" as one factor that makes a belief system vulnerable to disconfirmation. That is, a belief system which makes claims about the observable world is liable to be undercut by evidence drawn from that

Smith and the Book of Mormon. Apologists eschew such strategies, insisting instead that Smith's claims about the book's origin pertain to the empirical world—there really were Nephites, there really were golden plates. This in turn means that Smith's claims could be empirically corroborated, which apologists proceed to do in various ways: archaeological and geographical correspondences, textual evidence of an ancient Old World provenance, etc.

However, by Borhek and Curtis's criteria, Book of Mormon



world, while a belief system focused on unseen or intangible realities does not suffer this liability because its claims are not subject to empirical testing.

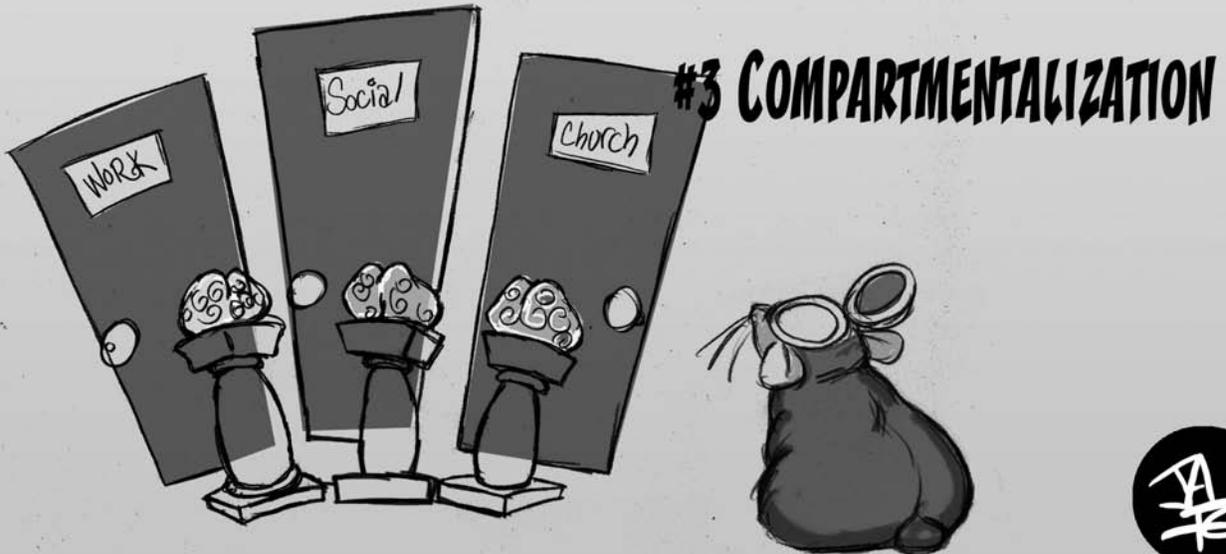
In the modern era, Borhek and Curtis observe, some churches have tried to avoid conflicts with the truth-making authority of science by retreating from the empirical relevance of their beliefs—for instance, when some liberal Christians speak of Christ's resurrection as a spiritual or mystical reality rather than an empirical one. Another strategy for reducing a belief system's vulnerability to disconfirmation is "retreating to abstraction." The hypothetical example of this strategy that Borhek and Curtis give is: "Our leaders do seem to have been swindlers, but their basic ideas were valid anyway" (p. 118). That line recalls some revisionist understandings of Joseph

historicity is not, in fact, an empirically relevant (testable) claim. If the claim were restricted to asserting only that a group of Israelites colonized ancient Mesoamerica, that would be empirically relevant because it is a claim of which Mormons and non-Mormons alike could be persuaded given appropriate evidence. Even if the claim were limited to asserting that the Book of Mormon is an ancient Hebrew text—without asserting the reality of prophets, or visits from the resurrected Christ, or the angel Moroni, or Joseph Smith's miraculous translation of golden plates—that claim, too, would be empirically relevant. For example, if apologist Brian Stubbs (1996) were to submit his claims about Hebrew influence on the Uto-Aztecan languages to non-Mormon linguists for peer review, scholars could, potentially, be persuaded that his claims are

# 3 Ways to Maintain your Plausibility Structure:



## #2 ENTANGLEMENT



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empirically valid. That would not, though, be the same as showing that the Book of Mormon is historical, since, as Stubbs acknowledges, there are scenarios that might account for the Hebrew influence other than the explanation offered by the Book of Mormon. Similarly, non-LDS scholars could potentially be persuaded that internal textual evidence indicates an ancient Hebrew origin for the Book of Mormon; FARMS scholar John Tvetdnes (2001) claims, in fact, to have met non-LDS scholars who are persuaded of this. It is not clear from Tvetdnes's account, however, if these scholars realize what a Hebrew origin for the Book of Mormon implies about Joseph Smith's claim to have translated the book by the power of God—and here we encounter the problem.

Claims about Hebrew influence on Uto-Aztecans, or about textual elements in the Book of Mormon suggestive of a Hebrew origin, are empirically relevant. But apologists employ those empirically relevant claims to lend credibility to an empirically nonrelevant thesis. The claim that the Book of Mormon is an ancient record is not really subject to empirical validation because that claim cannot be extracted from Joseph Smith's charismatic authority—his claim to be a prophet who conversed with angels and translated the book through miraculous means. Apologists recognize as much when they grant that ultimately only a testimony can prove the Book of Mormon's authenticity. The empirical nonrelevance of Book of Mormon historicity is also evident in the fact that the Church does not wait for scientists to verify the Book of Mormon's ancient origins before declaring the book to be authentic. An empirically relevant claim would require scientific evidence to validate it; Book of Mormon historicity is not subject to that requirement because it is not that kind of claim. Instead, belief in historicity “can be expected to survive or fail largely on the basis of the charisma of the prophet” (Borhek and Curtis, p. 119). We see this when apologists insist that accepting or denying the historicity of the Book of Mormon is equivalent to accepting or denying Joseph's Smith prophetic authority. Belief in historicity is also preserved by what Borhek and Curtis call “the maintenance of consensus through institutional means” (p. 119), such as disciplining members or eliminating CES instructors who disbelieve historicity.

Despite its empirical nonrelevance, belief in Book of Mormon historicity and the evidences offered to support it play important social functions for orthodox Latter-day Saints. Belief in historicity has become, in Borhek and Curtis' words, an “affirmation of group membership,” in other words, the way to distinguish a so-called faithful LDS scholar or intellectual from, by implication, an unfaithful one. As Borhek and Curtis explain, “The social response to a statement about such a belief has more to do with the status of the speaker in relation to the group than it does with the content of the statement. Is he an outsider? . . . A brother? A renegade?” (p. 125). Furthermore, the presentation of empirical evidence lends a convincing, scientific air to the empirically nonrelevant claim. This is especially true when audiences provide “a sufficiently receptive context” (p. 130) and when the presentation's physical setting evokes a sense of credibility. This was the case, for

instance, when scholars gave presentations supporting Book of Mormon historicity to a largely LDS audience during a 2005 symposium held at the Library of Congress. (A revisionist presentation delivered in a hotel ballroom or at a college campus as part of a lively debate at a Sunstone Symposium likewise draws credibility from its setting.)

Borhek and Curtis identify other strategies for validating empirically nonrelevant beliefs that are evident in Book of Mormon apologetics. One strategy is to link the issue with a recognized enemy; one of Borhek and Curtis's examples of this is civic groups who attack fluoridation as “Communist” (p. 131). Apologists make the same kind of move when they equate revisionists with Korihor the Antichrist or cast them as allies of anti-Mormon countercultists (Robinson 1991; Bitton 1994). Another strategy is to deny the existence of any middle ground, thus making “social identification . . . the dominating criterion of validity” (Borhek and Curtis, p. 133). Thus, by insisting that the Book of Mormon is historical or a fraud, proponents of the orthodox dilemma try to force skeptical, undecided, or indifferent members to make a choice: either you're with us, or you're against us.

Identifying these strategies reiterates that validation of belief is a social process, a process of creating (or imposing) consensus within a group. Empirical evidences can prove useful in that process as tools or weapons, but the process is fundamentally one of drawing and enforcing social boundaries: between insiders and outsiders, between compatriots and enemies, between people who should be taken seriously and people who should be ignored.

#### SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM AND TEXTUAL INTERPRETATION

AT THIS POINT, some readers may be thinking that while these sociological perspectives describe how people often form their beliefs in practice, people ought to draw conclusions about Book of Mormon historicity from an impartial, rational consideration of the evidence, independent of what we may have been socialized to believe. However, social constructionist understandings of knowledge rule out that possibility because the canons of rationality are themselves socially constructed. Not only does socialization produce our sense of what counts as a logical conclusion from the evidence or as a plausible explanation for the facts—the claim is more radical than that. Even the evidence, what we take to be the “facts,” is the product of a discourse community's conventional ways of knowing.

Applied to the historicity debates, a social constructionist perspective undercuts arguments based on parallels and similar kinds of internal textual evidence, whether they be the parallels apologists draw to antiquity or those that skeptics draw to Smith's environment. These arguments derive their persuasive force from the assumption that the parallels are objectively there: evidence pointing to a conclusion. However, theories of textual interpretation developed under the influence of social constructionism provide a very different account of what apol-

ogists and skeptics are doing. These theories suggest that when apologists and skeptics draw parallels between the Book of Mormon and an ancient or nineteenth-century setting, they are inventing, not discovering, evidence for what they already assume (or at least hypothesize) to be the book's origins. In short, an interpreter's ability to find convincing parallels to a particular setting has nothing, necessarily, to do with the book's origins. Rather, this ability is due to the interpreter, together with convinced readers, belonging to a discourse community whose conventions make it possible for the interpreter to draw parallels that readers will perceive as meaningful, not as mere coincidence or parallelomania.

*How we interpret: The construction  
of meaning and evidence*

TO ILLUSTRATE THE principle that evidence is invented, not found, I will use examples from the essays of American literary theorist Stanley Fish and from the novel *Foucault's Pendulum*, by Italian semiotician Umberto Eco. Fish and Eco are prominent figures in their disciplines, which specialize in the study of meaning.

Fish describes an informal experiment in which he told students in a course on seventeenth-century religious poetry that a list of linguists' names on the chalkboard, left over from a previous class, was in fact a poem. (Figure 1.) Asked to interpret the poem, the students quickly began to identify its various Christian allegorical elements. The poem, they observed, was in the shape of an altar or tree; they eventually came to favor a tree because that could represent the Virgin Mary, whose symbol is a rose tree, also referred to in the name "Rosenbaum." "Thorne," the students decided, referred to Jesus' crown of thorns; "Levin" recalled Levi and the unleavened bread of the Passover, both types of Christ. The shift from Jewish to Gentile names in the course of the poem was interpreted as representing the shift from the Old to the New Testament. One student even discovered that the three most frequently used letters in the poem were S, O, and N, which students took as a reference to the Son of God.

Fish maintains that the list of names was entirely the result of a previous lecture; that is, he did not manipulate the list to mislead the students into seeing Christian allegory. The fact that the students were able to identify—or rather, to invent—allegorical elements in a text where none were intended indicates that readers do not recognize the meaning of a text, or even the kind of text it is, because of "distinguishing characteristics" that are objectively there. Fish's students didn't *conclude* that the list was a Christian allegory because of their ability to read it as such. Rather, they "recognized" the poem as a Christian allegory *before* they started to read it. "They knew in advance that they were dealing with a poem—and the distinguishing characteristics followed" (Fish 1980, p. 326). Meaning does not reside in a text, ready-made, waiting for readers to come and extract it. Rather, readers construct meanings for texts—or, we could say, they impose meanings on texts—using the norms they have learned from their interpre-

tive communities. In Fish's words: "Skilled reading is usually thought to be a matter of discerning what is there, but . . . it is a matter of knowing how to produce what can thereafter be said to be there" (p. 327).

In *Foucault's Pendulum*, Umberto Eco (1990) uses fiction to make a similar point. The narrator, Casaubon, who works at a publishing firm, meets Ardeni, a would-be author who claims to have deciphered a fragmentary parchment containing a coded message from the secret society of Knights Templar. In Ardeni's interpretation of the parchment, the Templars outline a series of secret meetings to be held over a period of centuries, which will culminate in the revelation of the Holy Grail. This interpretation of the parchment is based on elaborate associations to lore about the Templars, hermetic magic, and conspiracy theories of history. At first, Casaubon is amused; but as he becomes gradually obsessed with Ardeni's vision of a secret Plan, Casaubon's skeptical wife, Lia, does some research of her own. Linking the parchment's fragmentary references to place names in the city where it was found, Lia concludes that it is nothing more than a florist's delivery list.

Eco's understanding of postmodern theories about knowledge and meaning-making is evident in the story he tells. His point is not that Ardeni's interpretation of the parchment is obviously absurd while Lia's is just as obviously the true interpretation. Both interpretations involve inductive leaps: possible parallels, conjectures leading to further conjectures, assertions for which the other side could spin an alternative explanation. In each case, the interpretation becomes compelling because of the way the interpreter piles up evidence, triumphantly brandishing pieces that fit, dismissing unresolved puzzles. And each interpretation yields different results



Figure 1. Believing this list of linguists' names was a poem, Stanley Fish's students used conventional techniques of literary analysis to interpret it as a complex Christian allegory. This experiment suggests that apologists' ability to locate ancient elements in the Book of Mormon—or skeptics' ability to find parallels to Smith's environment—does not necessarily reveal anything about the book's origins. (Source: Fish 1980, p. 323.)

principally because each is elaborated according to different ground rules, different logics, different norms about where to look for explanations and what kinds of explanation are plausible. It makes sense to Ardeni to interpret the parchment in light of hermetic lore because he already moves through occultist networks where such lore is taken seriously. However, Lia, a hard-headed rationalist, is convinced even before she begins to analyze the fragmentary message that a more pedestrian interpretation must be possible. To return to Fish's language: both interpreters knew in advance what they were looking at—a coded Templar message or something more mundane—and their recognition of “distinguishing characteristics” that supported their divergent readings followed their respective presuppositions. Each inevitably found—or rather, invented—evidence to support the reading to which he or she was committed. And this, Eco is saying, is simply how interpretation works.

*Inventing evidence for Book of Mormon origins*

APPLYING THESE THEORIES of interpretation to the Book of Mormon historicity debates, we would conclude that when apologists find internal evidence pointing to an ancient origin, the evidence follows, not precedes, their knowledge that the text is ancient. Just as Fish's students “knew in advance that they were dealing with a poem—and the distinguishing characteristics followed” (p. 326), so apologists know in advance that they are dealing with an ancient Hebrew text—and the distinguishing characteristics follow. To serve as an argument for historicity, chiasms or parallels to Old World customs must be regarded as simply there in the text, waiting to be discovered. But to repeat Fish's language: although it seems to orthodox interpreters that they are “discerning what is there” in the text, they are in fact, like Fish's students, “produc[ing] what can thereafter be said to be there” (p. 327). Apologists are inventing, not discovering, the parallels they cite as evidence for ancient origins. Fish's students were able to “find” elaborate Christian allegories where none were objectively present; by the same token, apologists' ability to find numerous, complicated correspondences to antiquity in the Book of Mormon does not necessarily mean that the book has an ancient origin.

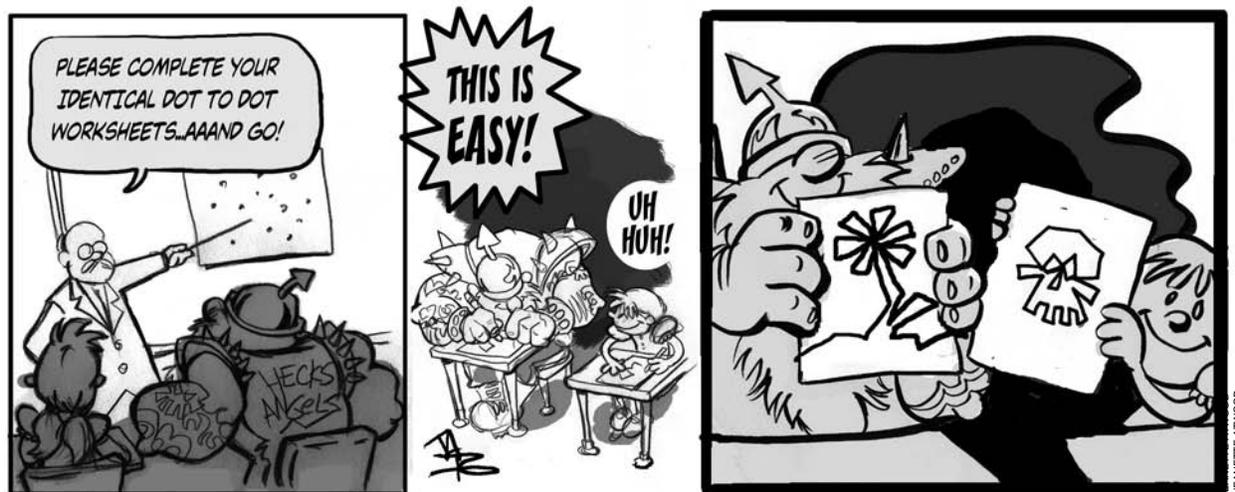
This same principle holds true, however, for the parallels that skeptics see between the Book of Mormon and Smith's nineteenth-century environment. Those parallels, too, are invented, not discovered. Skeptics know in advance (or at least hypothesize) that they are dealing with a nineteenth-century composition—and the distinguishing characteristics follow. Although they believe they are discerning what is simply there in the text, they are in fact producing what they believe is there. The same is true for even more idiosyncratic interpretations of the Book of Mormon, whether as a lost history of the African nation Eritrea (Melekin 2000) or as a coded message to nineteenth-century Masons about how to build up a new order of Knights Templar (Forsberg 2004). In every case, interpreters believe they have identified the truth that the Book of Mormon text reveals about itself. But in reality, interpreters

construct for themselves an ancient Book of Mormon, or a nineteenth-century Book of Mormon, or a modern expansion of an ancient text, or a work of fictional scripture, etc. And other interpreters find these constructions of the Book of Mormon more or less plausible depending on the shared knowledge they already take as “givens.”

When an apologist such as Daniel Peterson (2000a) boasts that “persons who choose to dismiss the Book of Mormon” must somehow account for “the mounting evidence for its authenticity” (p. 22), a social constructionist perspective would judge this assertion to be, if not naïve, then a rhetorical flourish, a show of bravura intended to boost the morale of insiders. The sterner reality is that despite the volumes of internal evidence for historicity they have produced, orthodox scholars lack the social leverage that would be required to press readers outside orthodox LDS discourse communities to engage with their work. (Apologists take some solace from knowing that this literature has won begrudging respect among evangelical apologists; see Mosser and Owen 1998.) Returning to Peterson's challenge, skeptics have, in fact, accounted for the “mounting evidence” created by the never-ending stream of orthodox scholarship: namely, by dismissing it as pseudo-scholarship, evidence marshaled after the fact to support predetermined conclusions. And in a sense they are right, given the socially constructed nature of evidence—but with the crucial caveat that skeptics' arguments for a nineteenth-century origin merit the same description in the same sense.

This is because what apologists call “evidence” pointing to historicity would be more accurately described as “readings” premised on historicity. Apologists have developed elaborate readings of the Book of Mormon: reading Alma 36 as a chiasm, reading King Benjamin's address as an ancient Near Eastern coronation, reading the Book of Mormon's internal geography onto the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. But like all readings, apologists' readings carry persuasive force only for discourse communities who share the conventions by which the readings were produced. Granted, orthodox scholars develop their readings of the Book of Mormon using methods conventional for their disciplines: history, anthropology, classics, biblical studies. But the plausibility of these readings ultimately rests on orthodox scholarship's defining unconventional premise: that the Book of Mormon was delivered by an angel to a farmboy called to be a prophet. Outsiders who dismiss that premise will also dismiss the readings that follow from it, no matter how extensive or sophisticated those readings may be. As Terryl Givens has remarked, “The Book of Mormon's insistent claims to supernatural provenance do not bode well for any change soon in the general scholarly neglect” of orthodox scholarship (2002, pp. 149-50).

Likewise, what skeptics call “evidence” pointing to a nineteenth-century origin would be more accurately described as “readings” premised on a nineteenth-century origin. These readings too can be elaborate, especially readings of a psychoanalytic bent. But like all readings, skeptics' readings carry persuasive force only for discourse communities who share the



conventions by which the readings were produced. The crucial difference from orthodox readings is that there are many more discourse communities that take the Book of Mormon to be a nineteenth-century composition than there are that take it to be ancient. The result is a powerful public bias in favor of skeptical readings of the Book of Mormon. That bias is so powerful that some skeptical readings have been judged plausible by prominent discourse communities (e.g., academic communities) even when strong arguments could be made against those readings by those same communities' standards. This was the case with John Brooke's *The Refiner's Fire* (1994) and Clyde Forsberg's *Equal Rites* (2004), both published by university presses, the former to considerable scholarly acclaim, despite significant weaknesses in their application of scholarly methods (Duffy 2006).

The message here is that when a reading is judged to be "plausible" this means that the reading is consistent with the conventional wisdom of the discourse community passing that judgment. Whether or not a reading seems plausible to readers has nothing to do with whether or not that reading corresponds to objective reality. The fact that apologists can read the Book of Mormon as an ancient text does not necessarily mean it is an ancient text, and the fact that skeptics can read it as a nineteenth-century text does not necessarily mean it is a nineteenth-century text—just as Fish's students could read the list of linguists as a Christian allegory without it actually being a Christian allegory.

Apologists have insinuated that the parallels and other internal evidences they have found for historicity far exceed

MEANING DOES NOT RESIDE IN A TEXT, READY-MADE, WAITING FOR READERS TO COME AND EXTRACT IT. RATHER, READERS CONSTRUCT —OR IMPOSE—MEANINGS ON TEXTS USING THE NORMS THEY HAVE LEARNED FROM THEIR INTERPRETIVE COMMUNITIES.

what could be attributed to mere coincidence (Madsen 1982; Nibley 1988; J. E. Clark 2006). But their claim has no more persuasive force than if Fish's students had protested that the Christian allegorical elements they identified could not be mere coincidence. That is to say, the claim can have force only within a discourse community that already regards readers' assumptions about the text as plausible—namely, a community that believes the Book of Mormon is ancient. But the claim can exercise no persuasive force for readers who are firmly embedded in discourse communities whose conventional wisdom rules that imagining the Book of Mormon to be an ancient text translated by supernatural means lies beyond the limits of the credible. Again, the problem is not only that the communities disagree about how to interpret or weigh the evidence; the problem is also that they disagree on what constitutes evidence, or fact, in the first place.

#### A NEW APPROACH TO THE HISTORICITY QUESTION?

**T**O REVIEW: WHEN applied to the Book of Mormon historicity debates, sociological perspectives on knowledge suggest the following.

- Belief in historicity results from socialization into orthodox LDS networks; conversely, Latter-day Saints who doubt historicity do so as a result of weakened identification with such networks—for instance, as a result of socialization into academic communities and their ways of knowing.

- To sustain their beliefs about historicity, orthodox Saints and skeptics alike must keep themselves immersed in a universe of discourse where those beliefs are affirmed as sensible; this task is more difficult for the orthodox, because theirs is a minority view in the larger society, but the continual production of apologetic literature helps meet this need.

- Although Book of Mormon historicity is tied to Joseph Smith's prophetic authority and is therefore not an empirically testable claim, apologists' marshalling of empirical evidence serves important social functions such as evoking a sense of credibility and marking boundaries between insiders and outsiders.

- The internal evidences that apologists and skeptics offer to support their respective views on historicity are produced by divergent readings of the text, built on divergent premises; the ability to construct such readings does not necessarily shed light on the book's origins, and a given reading will be persuasive only within discourse communities that share its underlying premises.

If we accept these perspectives, what should we conclude about the Book of Mormon historicity debates? Are beliefs about historicity purely relative, and is discussion therefore pointless? What, if anything, do social constructionist perspectives imply about how a person should decide what to believe about historicity?

*Is it all just relative?*

IT MIGHT SEEM that a social constructionist perspective requires us to throw up our hands and declare: Readers will see whatever they want in the Book of Mormon; there's no way to know whose reading is right, so there's no point in arguing about it. While social constructionism is undeniably relativistic, there are nevertheless two reasons not to conclude that interpretation is purely, hopelessly relative.

First, interpretations of the Book of Mormon can never be purely idiosyncratic because the interpretive process is not purely individual. Rather, interpretations are created through the application of norms shared by some group. As Fish explains, "Interpretive communities . . . are responsible both for the shape of a reader's activities and for the texts those activities produce" (p. 322). Even interpretations of Book of Mormon origins that seem to have a single proponent—such as Embaye Melekin's Afrocentric appropriation of the Book of Mormon as a lost history of Eritrea, or Clyde Forsberg's reading of the book as a coded Masonic manifesto—reproduce ways of reading that are conventional for their discourse communities (in these cases, Afrocentrists or hermeticists). The communal nature of interpretation means that interpreters have to persuade readers within a given discourse community that their particular interpretation measures up to the commu-

nity's norms. For example, not every argument offered on behalf of Book of Mormon historicity will be judged plausible or well supported by editors at FARMS.

When it comes to arbitrating between interpretations of the Book of Mormon offered by different discourse communities, such as apologists versus revisionists, one is likely to encounter situations where the parties draw incommensurable conclusions from incommensurable premises. At that point one may feel compelled to resort to relativism: "Each side will see what they want; we can't resolve the debate, so what does it matter?" But the second reason not to settle on this conclusion is that beliefs about Book of Mormon historicity can have tangible consequences in people's lives, for good or for ill, which means that what people believe matters very much. A loss of faith in Book of Mormon historicity can be traumatic for individuals and families. Revisionist David Wright lost his job at BYU because of his disbelief in historicity and, like some other revisionists, was later expelled from the Church. On the other hand, believing in historicity might be a professional liability for an LDS academic outside BYU. Dennis Potter (2005) and John Williams (2005) have argued that beliefs related to historicity—namely, beliefs about Lamanites—can have real world consequences such as influencing whether Mormons participate in oppressing or liberating Native Americans.

An analogy which demonstrates how much can be at stake in what people believe about a text's origins is the Mark Hofmann forgeries (Sillitoe and Roberts 1989; Turley 1992). People died over the question of whether Hofmann's finds were what he claimed they were. We could analyze the Hofmann case in the same constructionist terms I have used to discuss Stanley Fish's students or the Book of Mormon historicity debates. We could speak of prosecutors and their witnesses "inventing" the evidence that supported their reading of the Hofmann documents as forgeries. We could identify social reasons that the prosecution's interpretation of the documents has come to wield the authority of undisputed truth: first, because that interpretation was endorsed by a powerful truth-making institution, the courts; second, because Hofmann has not attracted a cadre of devoted apologists who relentlessly pick apart the prosecution's arguments and churn out counterevidence to support the authenticity of Hofmann's finds; and third, because Hofmann himself acquiesced in the prosecution's construction of events. From a social constructionist perspective, all this would be an accurate account of how the truth about Mark Hofmann's forgeries was produced. But the fact that this truth was socially constructed certainly does not make it inconsequential. In a less dramatic way, beliefs about Book of Mormon historicity also have social consequences that make people's conclusions about this question matter.

A social constructionist perspective does not suggest that Latter-day Saints should dispense with trying to draw conclusions about Book of Mormon historicity, individually or collectively. On the contrary, people can, and do, reach conclusions about historicity all the time. They must: Fish's theory implies that the ability to make any sense of the Book of Mormon at all depends on readers having some working beliefs, however

vague or provisional, about what this text is and where it came from. What a social constructionist perspective does suggest is that we cannot arbitrate between competing discourse communities' claims about historicity from a position that is not itself already embedded in prior assumptions about what is plausible. No such position exists. In other words, we cannot suspend all belief until after we have examined the evidence; we cannot approach the historicity question with a wide open mind; we cannot be objective as that term is often understood. We cannot do these things because our sense of what counts as evidence—what is well reasoned, what is plausible, what merits any consideration at all—depends on prior beliefs, beliefs we derive from the discursive communities with which we are affiliated. We are back, in other words, to plausibility structures: the social bases that produce our beliefs.

### *Social constructionism in LDS apologetics*

THE IDEA THAT we cannot be objective in assessing the historicity question is not new. Some revisionists resist the idea; Edward Ashment, Brent Metcalfe, Dan Vogel, and David Wright have all insisted on the possibility of arriving at objective truth through properly applied method, free of bias. By contrast, a number of orthodox writers—from Richard Bushman to Louis Midgley to Kevin Christensen—have argued with varying degrees of sophistication for the impossibility of objective knowledge. As one observer notes: orthodox scholars, “having embraced postmodernist attitudes on the social construction of ‘truth,’” maintain that a person’s assessment of arguments around Book of Mormon historicity is never neutral or free of presuppositions (Introvigne 1996, p. 10).

Apologet Noel Reynolds (1997) draws close to a social constructionist understanding when he recognizes that the persuasive force of evidence depends on a discourse community’s prior understandings of what is plausible. “There is no point,” Reynolds remarks, “in discussing the evidence or arguments for or against the Joseph Smith account [of the Book of Mormon] unless the discussants at least accept the possibility of its truth.” Only then, he says, can “reasonable discussion . . . focus on the merits of the evidence” (p. 97). Similarly, John Sorenson (1985) grants that no number of parallels can prove anything about historicity, since readers “who are already inclined to accept will conclude that the parallels constitute overwhelming evidence while more skeptical minds will chalk up the same parallels to faulty data, or to a series of misinterpretations on my part, or to mere coincidence” (p. xviii).

Incidentally, the willingness of orthodox scholars to grant that knowledge is constructed, and revisionists’ tendency to resist that view, can be explained in sociological terms. It stands to reason that apologists, as a disadvantaged minority in the academy, would argue for the political, supposition-laden nature of what currently counts as “science” or “critical scholarship.” It is advantageous for apologists to argue thus because the argument relativizes and thus undermines the authority of the naturalistic assumptions dominating academia—assump-

tions which exclude Book of Mormon historicity as a credible position. It is likewise understandable that revisionists would be reluctant to acknowledge that the norms of rationality on which they base their arguments are socially constructed. Acknowledging that would relativize the authority of those norms—which is hardly what revisionists want to do, since they are relying on the authority of rationality or science as a counterweight to the authority of LDS orthodoxy.

### *Does social construction make a difference?*

IF WE ACCEPT a social constructionist perspective—if we accept that our judgments about historicity are the result of socialization and that those judgments therefore prove nothing about objective reality—how then should we proceed in adopting a position on Book of Mormon historicity?

One might argue that a social constructionist perspective ultimately makes no difference in how we assess arguments and arrive at beliefs. Since we could not function in the world if we constantly relativized every idea, there comes a point at which, even if we know our beliefs are socially constructed, we have to treat them as simply true. Debate and analysis therefore proceed as they did before social constructionism. Knowing that I find certain beliefs plausible because of my socialization does not, or need not, change the fact that I find those beliefs plausible.

However, buying into social constructionism does mean that certain kinds of arguments made around historicity will become less persuasive. Apologists and skeptics alike argue that they have piled up too many parallels, either to antiquity or to the nineteenth century, to be mere coincidence. As we have seen, however, such arguments are naïve from a social constructionist perspective since, according to that perspective, the parallels are the invention of interpreters and therefore do not necessarily tell us anything about the text’s actual origins. Some Book of Mormon skeptics accuse apologists of exercising “strategically-placed attention and inattention to evidence” based on conclusions that the apologists have arrived at in advance (Metcalfe 1993, pp. 156–58). But such accusations lose their force if one concurs with social constructionists that all interpretation operates in this way, including the skeptics’ own interpretations of the Book of Mormon. Thomas Murphy has faulted John Sorenson’s limited geography because instead of being “based . . . on scientific evidence,” it “serves social functions,” such as preserving the plausibility of the Book of Mormon in the face of potential challenges or demarcating certain avenues of scholarly inquiry as acceptable for orthodox scholars (2003, pp. 129–31). This criticism, too, loses much of its force if one regards all knowledge as serving social functions.

On the other side, when apologist William Hamblin proposes that readers compare the work of apologists and revisionists to decide “whose arguments are superior” (1995, p. 87), he glosses over a host of complications that social constructionism raises regarding how readers would recognize an argument as superior, particularly when the arguments being

compared are built from such divergent premises. Because the conversation occurs between different discourse communities, the Book of Mormon historicity debates are not as simple as seeing who has the best evidence and analysis, contrary to what Hamblin implies. Shifting to a different claim: Daniel Peterson protests against skeptics' "a priori attitude of total dismissal" toward orthodox scholarship, an attitude which leads skeptics to "declare themselves the winners of a race from which competitors have effectively been banned" (1993, 13). This statement loses force



Apologists and skeptics tend to approach their task as if deciding what to believe about historicity is a process of weighing the arguments for and against to determine which are most sound. Alternatively, you might approach the process as one of deciding which social affiliations are most important to you—since those social affiliations, and the beliefs they sustain, will lead you to conclude that certain arguments are the most sound.

Are you willing to be a person who subscribes to what most people in your society view as peculiar, if not bizarre, claims about an angel and golden plates? Are you willing to accept the marginalization that implies? Are you willing, for example, to dissent from dominant constructions of reality in some of the academic disciplines? On the other hand, are you willing to have



WHICH INTERPRETIVE  
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"YOUR PEOPLE"?



from a social constructionist perspective if it is meant to imply that a priori dismissal is illegitimate as a rule, since every discourse community practices a priori dismissals of some kind. (It is a different matter if Peterson's intention is to argue that skeptics should not dismiss orthodox scholarship in particular, or if he means to say that skeptics cannot credibly claim to have rebutted what they have in fact only dismissed.)

*Weigh relationships, not arguments*

IN ADDITION TO problematizing the lines of argument discussed above, social constructionism could potentially make an even more dramatic difference in a person's approach to the historicity question. If you accept that your sense of the plausibility of a certain argument about historicity is a product of your commitment to certain social groups (plausibility structures, discourse communities), then that knowledge might prompt you to spend less time examining the arguments and more time examining your social commitments.

your relationships within the Church complicated, perhaps strained or broken? How significant is your LDS membership to you, and why? People decide these questions, whether or not they are conscious of doing so, whenever they adopt a position on historicity. Would it be helpful, then, to think through such questions explicitly?

We have seen that sociological perspectives on knowledge indicate that beliefs are produced and sustained by affiliation with communities who share those beliefs. Once you have committed to such a community, whatever it is, you may be assured of finding corroborating evidence for the community's beliefs, whatever they are. Conversation with others who share your beliefs will reinforce your sense of those beliefs' plausibility, despite outsiders' skepticism, and it will let you feel justified in ignoring or minimizing counterarguments. What is really at question, then, is: Which interpretive community are you going to belong to? Which affiliations with other people do you find most rewarding? Whom do you want to be able to claim as "your people"? Whom do you prefer to keep at a cau-

tious arm's length? With whom would you rather have nothing to do at all? And which position on historicity will allow you to maintain the relationships you desire?

I confess to being uncertain how helpful these sociological perspectives on the Book of Mormon historicity debates will prove for readers who are trying to find their way to a position. An argument can be made that social constructionism yields little practical guidance for people working out their beliefs "on the ground," however convincing it may be as a theoretical account "from the air" of what those people are doing.

But on the chance that this perspective may prove illuminating and useful for some readers, I reiterate: According to a social constructionist perspective, you do not arrive at a position on Book of Mormon historicity by sitting alone somewhere, reading and weighing the arguments in your head, even though it might look and feel like that is what you are doing. Rather, you arrive at a position by negotiating relationships—relationships to the Church, to academic discourse communities, and to other groups in the mainstream or on the margins of modern society, such as evangelical Christians or secular humanists. More concretely, deciding what to believe about historicity means deciding what kinds of relationships to have with specific people in your life: family, church members, colleagues, neighbors. And from a theological perspective, it means deciding what kind of relationship, if any, to have with God.

## CONCLUSION

**I** CONCLUDE THIS two-part framing article by reiterating a point I made at the beginning of Part One: from an LDS perspective, faith in the Book of Mormon must rest, first and finally, on testimony—on spiritual experiences sought through pondering, praying, and experimenting on the word (Moroni 10:3–5; Alma 32:26–43). A conviction that is based merely on rational arguments or empirical evidence will be perpetually unstable, having to be reevaluated every time a new argument or new evidence comes along. Even a firm disbelief in the Book of Mormon will be based on bedrock assumptions that resemble a testimony inasmuch as they arise from forceful intuitions about reality or compelling life experiences.

Deciding whether or not you think the Book of Mormon is an ancient document miraculously translated by Joseph Smith is not a question on the same order of deciding, for instance, whether or not you think William Shakespeare of Stratford-upon-Avon actually wrote the plays attributed to him, a question that has attracted some controversy in recent years. The Shakespeare authorship question is an example of an empirically relevant question, and one's views on a question of that nature ought always to be open in theory to the possibility of revision based on new empirical arguments. But as an empirically nonrelevant question, Book of Mormon historicity must be resolved differently: by conversion to some variety of religious faith (or a self-conscious rejection of religious faith). All the empirical arguments that apologists and skeptics offer for

or against Book of Mormon historicity serve only to reinforce, or at most to modulate, convictions that are necessarily reached by means other than empirical argument.

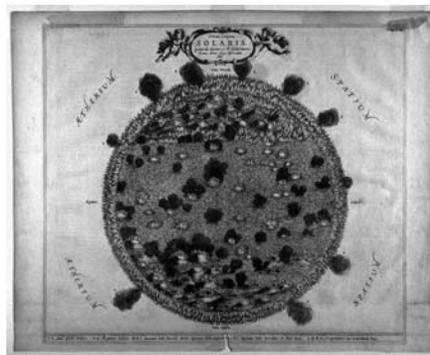
From a perspective grounded in the sociology of knowledge, the Book of Mormon historicity question is at core a question of relationships. How should Latter-day Saints relate to other social groups and their ways of knowing—for example, academic discourse communities? And how should Latter-day Saints who disagree about historicity relate to one another? That last question can be posed in various directions: How should orthodox Saints relate to revisionists who want to remain in the Church? How should revisionists relate to apologists? How should both relate to more hostile Book of Mormon critics?

But given how power is presently distributed in the Church, the question's most urgent form is this: How should the orthodox majority treat the minority of skeptics in the Church? As fellow Saints in good standing, without reservation? As members not entirely sound in doctrine yet tolerable? As struggling individuals in need of fellowship? As apostates who need to be disciplined to prevent their leading others astray? As traitors who seek to destroy God's church? As harmlessly idiosyncratic? A valued alternative perspective? An enemy to be fought? How Latter-day Saints should treat people with differing views on Book of Mormon historicity is one of the most fundamental questions facing the Saints because it is bound up in other fundamental questions—questions about what it means to be members of a community called to be one in heart and mind, faithful to God's word, seekers and witnesses of truth, and, above all, practitioners of Christlike love.

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## BASQUE CARVING

Halfway up the Sierras west of Reno towards timberline, names sounding strange to us alphabetize the trees. Carved fifty years before in the white bark of aspen, they have healed themselves black in deep cut grooves, age peeling the skin back in clusters. Wind-played, leaves quake like chimes sounding vespers in the sheep-grazed meadow grass. In 1933, a shepherd, border collie at heel, signed his name to these trees, imagined abstract wolves and art deco dressed women, inlaid pictures drawn around the slender trunks, dated for us and others to see. We come here years later, high valley lit by the growing night sky, new witnesses to old art. We lie down to sleep with his women in this cutback clearing, counting wolves like those he saw, wondering what he didn't carve.

—GARLAND STROTHER