



Authorship of the book of mormon

1 nephi 13.²⁰⁻²⁹

i Introduction

Over the past nearly 200 years, various individuals and institutions have offered a number of proposals concerning how the Book of Mormon came to be. The following are among the leading proposals:

1. Inspired ancient authors wrote on metal plates, which were then translated by Joseph Smith by means of some type of “mechanical” process—urim and thummim, and/or seer stone. This, of course, is the earliest and perhaps most orthodox of the views.
2. Inspired ancient authors wrote on metal plates, which were then translated by Joseph Smith by means of some type of intersection between the text and the translator himself.
3. An inspired Joseph Smith wrote the Book. This is the newest of the proposals.
4. Based upon his observations of then current religious and folklore traditions, an uninspired Joseph Smith wrote the Book on his own.
5. The literary work of some other uninspired 19th century author—Sidney Rigdon, Solomon Spaulding, Ethen Smith, etc.—served as foundation and inspiration for Joseph Smith, who authored the Book.
6. An uninspired Joseph Smith wrote the Book using some type of channeling process

initiated by some demonic influence.

The first three proposals come from Joseph Smith himself, or his followers/supporters. They are positive reflections on the origins of the Book.¹

The last three proposals come from detractors of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon.

The 1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 6th proposal all involve some type of supernatural phenomenon—good or evil—while the 4th and 5th do not.

The multiplicity of proposals might reflect ignorance or skepticism on the part of the student. On the other hand, it might simply reflect a complexity that is found in the Book itself.

Below, I will share just one example of the kind of complexity the Book presents the reader when investigating questions concerning authorship. It comes from 1 Nephi 13.²⁰⁻²⁹. Here is the text itself.

1 nephi 13.²⁰⁻²⁹

*I, Nephi, beheld that they did prosper in the land; and I beheld a book, and it was carried forth among them. ²¹And the angel said unto me: “Knowest thou the meaning of the book?”

And I said unto him: “I know not.”

And he said: “Behold it proceedeth out of the mouth of a Jew.”

And I, Nephi, beheld it; and he said unto me: “The book that thou beholdest is a record of the Jews, which contains the covenants of the Lord, which he hath made unto the house of Israel; and it also containeth many of the prophecies of the holy prophets; and it is a record like unto the engravings which are upon the plates of brass, save there are not so many; nevertheless, they contain the covenants of the Lord, which he hath made unto the house of Israel; wherefore, they are of great worth unto the Gentiles.”

¹ Some, including, for example, Jeffery R. Holland have argued that #3 is not a positive reflection on Joseph Smith or the Book.

²⁴And the angel of the Lord said unto me: “Thou hast beheld that the book proceeded forth from the mouth of a Jew; and when it proceeded forth from the mouth of a Jew it contained the fulness of the gospel of the Lord, of whom the twelve apostles bear record; and they bear record according to the truth which is in the Lamb of God. ²⁵Wherefore, these things go forth from the Jews in purity unto the Gentiles, according to the truth which is in God.

²⁶“And after they go forth by the hand of the twelve apostles of the Lamb, from the Jews unto the Gentiles, thou seest the formation of that great and abominable church, which is most abominable above all other churches; for behold, they have taken away from the gospel of the Lamb many parts which are plain and most precious; and also many covenants of the Lord have they taken away. ²⁷And all this have they done that they might pervert the right ways of the Lord, that they might blind the eyes and harden the hearts of the children of men.

²⁸“Wherefore, thou seest that after the book hath gone forth through the hands of the great and abominable church, that there are many plain and precious things taken away from the book, which is the book of the Lamb of God. ²⁹And after these plain and precious things were taken away it goeth forth unto all the nations of the Gentiles; and after it goeth forth unto all the nations of the Gentiles, yea, even across the many waters which thou hast seen with the Gentiles which have gone forth out of captivity, thou seest—because of the many plain and precious things which have been taken out of the book, which were plain unto the understanding of the children of men, according to the plainness which is in the Lamb of God—because of these things which are taken away out of the gospel of the Lamb, an exceedingly great many do stumble, yea, insomuch that Satan hath great power over them.”²

Context of 1 nephi 13.²⁰⁻²⁹

First, a review of the extended and immediate context of these verses might be in order.

The *extended* context for these verses is a series of visions given to Nephi, first named writer

² This is the author’s formatting of the texts. No words have been changed except where there is an asterisk (*). In my formatted text of the Book, the asterisk indicates the removal of the pervasive “it came to pass,” “it shall come to pass,” etc. It may represent for some an important and affirming “Hebraism,” but for the reader trying to maintain a flow and read for comprehension, it can be quite obnoxious and adds little if any meaning to the text.

in the Book of Mormon. These visions represent an explanation of his father's dream that is found in 1 Nephi 8. The visions extend from 1 Nephi 11.¹ through 1 Nephi 14.³⁰. In the course of these visions Nephi is shown God's salvation history from the birth of Jesus, the Messiah, to the fall of Babylon in the end times.

The *immediate* context for these verses is the eleventh of what I reckon to be Nephi's thirteen visions.^a This vision takes in 1 Ne. 13.¹-14.⁷. In this vision, Nephi sees a "great church," with unholy "desires." This church is formed among the "gentiles" (1-9). He sees these gentiles come to America, "prosper," and rebel from their European roots and influences (10-19).

Summary of 1 Nephi 13.²⁰⁻²⁹

We now come to the verses that are the principle focus of this study: 13.²⁰⁻²⁹. In this portion of the vision, Nephi sees that the gentiles are in possession of "a book."

Nephi learns that this book is "a record of the Jews."

This record "is a record like unto the engravings which are upon the plates of brass, save there are not so many."³

Informed that the book issues "from the mouth of a Jew," Nephi learns that the book contains "the fullness of the gospel of the Lord, of whom the twelve apostles bear record."

Finally, the vision also affirms that the book comes "forth by the hand of the twelve apostles of the Lamb... in purity."

Nephi next sees that a "great and abominable church" removes from the book "many parts which are plain and most precious; and also many covenants of the Lord." This editing of the book causes those in possession of the Book to "stumble," giving Satan "great power over them."

³ While it is not absolutely certain which record is the longer—brass plates or Bible—the grammar, referring to the Bible in the singular (it) and the brass plates in the plural (they), seems to say that the Bible is the longer of the two records. Notwithstanding the fact that the brass plates possess some Old Testament period texts not found in the Bible, the Bible contains the New Testament, a considerable amount of material obviously missing from the Old Testament period brass plates.

From this point, verses 30-42, Nephi sees that God reveals and makes available another book. This book contains things revealed “unto thy seed,” meaning Nephi’s descendants. God reveals other books. These books counteract the original Book’s deficits, brought about by devious editing on the part of the “great and abominable church.” “These last records... shall establish the truth of the first...and shall make known the plain and precious things which have been taken away from them.”

The 11th vision closes with a warning that if the gentiles do not accept and pay heed to the things found in *all* of these books, they will be “brought down into captivity, and also into destruction, both temporally and spiritually, according to the captivity of the devil.” The angel then invites Nephi to “look” once more and the 12th vision opens.

Ġ Interpretation of 1 nephi 13.²⁰⁻²⁹

For the purposes of this discussion, we can draw out the following points and interpretations.

1. Based upon the vision itself and with the benefit of historical hindsight, we understand the first book that Nephi saw in his vision to be the Bible as we have it today, consisting of the Old⁴ and New Testament.⁵
2. According to the vision, the Bible has the following history:
 - It was written by Jews.
 - In the first century A.D., or shortly thereafter, the “twelve apostles of the Lamb,” acting as middle-men between Jews and Gentiles,⁶ passed the Bible on to the Gentiles. At this stage, as far as the apostles were concerned, the Bible was in its “purity” and “contained the *fullness* of the gospel of the Lord.”

⁴ In addition to the obvious fact that the Bible we inherited contains both the Old and New Testament, Nephi’s vision itself seems to include the Old Testament with its statement that the book is “a record like unto the engravings which are upon the plates of brass.”

⁵ Again, in addition to the obvious fact that the Bible we inherited contains both the Old and New Testament, the vision speaks of the book as coming “forth by the hand of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.” This seems to demand that the book Nephi saw included the New Testament.

⁶ The Apostles were also Jews, as it turns out.

- “After [the Bible went] forth by the hand of the twelve apostles” a “great and abominable church”⁷ removed “many parts which are plain and most precious; and also many covenants of the Lord” from the Bible (This would have taken place between, say, 100 and 1500 A.D.).
- After the Bible had been changed, Europeans brought it to the Americas (This took place after around 1500 A.D.).

Difficulties surrounding 1 Nephi 13.²⁰⁻²⁹ and its interpretation

As we have seen, 1 Nephi 13.²⁰⁻²⁹ suggests that the Bible left the apostles’ hands pure, containing the fullness of the gospel. It was corrupted thereafter by a “great and abominable church.” This is part of the stock and trade for the LDS perspective concerning the Bible.

For now, we will limit our discussion to that portion of the Bible known as the Old Testament, and ask the question, “Is there evidence that supports the vision’s contention that the *Old* Testament was significantly changed—with ‘plain and precious’ parts, including a ‘fullness of the gospel’ removed—*during the Christian era* of the Book’s existence?”

Some fifty years ago, a shepherd boy fell into a cave in the area just west of the Dead Sea. He came out with an amazing story: “There’s scrolls in them thar hills!” Over the years that followed, local Arab’s and, later, archaeologists unearthed thousands of manuscripts from multiple caves outside of Qumran, a city located on the western shores of the Dead Sea. In the year’s following their discovery, many of these manuscripts have been read, transliterated, and translated. They are popularly known as the Dead Sea Scrolls.

According to scholars, these texts were copied and then buried sometime between 200 BC and 100 AD. Their copiers and buriers were Jews.

⁷ Though it is not politically correct to say (a certain Bruce R. McConkie said it many years ago and was asked to edit it out of his best-selling book), the only “church” that existed between 100 and 1500 A.D. is that of the Catholic Church. This almost certainly is how the text is to be read and how Joseph Smith, the first modern reader, would have understood it.

Among these scrolls and scrapes are many containing portions of the Old Testament. In fact, all books of the Old Testament are represented except for Esther.

With the discovery of so many manuscripts containing large portions of the Old Testament, we have been afforded a remarkable and new opportunity. We can compare the later Hebrew texts we inherited with those from as early as 200 BC and as late as 100 AD. For example, we can compare the most authoritative Hebrew text, the Masoretic (copied around 1000 A.D.), with the Dead Sea Scrolls. In other words, we can compare the Old Testament text as it existed before and after the early Christian Church period.

What we have found is nothing short of miraculous and utterly unexpected and surprising. The Masoretic text is remarkably similar to the Biblical texts found in the caves around Qumran. In at least one case, that of the Book of Leviticus, the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Masoretic text are very nearly identical!

We now return to the question with which this section began: “Is there evidence that supports this vision’s contention that the *Old* Testament was significantly changed— with ‘plain and precious’ parts, including a ‘fullness of the gospel’ removed—*during the Christian era* of the Book’s existence?”

The answer is, “No.”

In fact, the evidence is overwhelming that there were few, if any, significant changes made to the *Old* Testament between around 200 B.C. and today. Any changes made to the “original” *Old* Testament must have taken place during the *pre-Christian* era. No post-apostolic individual or institution—good or evil—made significant changes to the *Old* Testament text during the Christian era. The Old Testament that you and I read today is remarkably similar to that which was in existence before the advent of the Christian era.

We will not dogmatically demand that the reader accept the apparent contradiction between 1 Nephi 13.²⁰⁻²⁹ and the historical and textual evidence concerning the Bible (*Old* Testament specifically). However, it does not seem extreme to at least acknowledge the existence of *tension* between the vision and the evidence.

We now explore the following question: “How do we explain the apparent discrepancy and clear tension between the vision and the textual evidence?” I suppose there are any number of possible explanations. Here are a few that have come to my mind.

1. One might argue that the interpretation offered previously concerning 1 Nephi 13.²⁰⁻²⁹ is faulty. The vision found in these verses is not about the Bible and its textual history.

Now, I readily accept that I am fallible. I could be wrong. I would welcome any suggestions concerning assumptions made in my interpretation of 1 Nephi 13.²⁰⁻²⁹ that are incorrect. I would welcome suggestions for what the vision does see, if it is not the Bible and its textual history. What Book is it? Can we know? Admittedly, we would want a well thought out presentation of the alternative. Until such suggestions and presentation, this is what I understand the text to say.

I should probably add that, while not, in my view, “canonical” in the same sense that the text itself, the official chapter heading of the LDS Book of Mormon identifies the book as the Bible and identifies the “church” as one “set up among the Gentiles.”

2. Some might conclude that Nephi’s vision is right about the Bible’s textual history, and that the modern scholarly findings concerning the text of the Bible are somehow faulty.

Now, I am well aware that anti-intellectual sentiments are very much in vogue these days. Global warming is a myth, etc., etc. So-called “elites”—governing, media, intellectual, etc.— are said to lie and manipulate data to their own ends. Such attitudes and skepticism might be justified at the individual level. However, when it comes to the findings above, there is a very wide consensus. One must deal with this consensus. It seems to me that the detractors bear the burden of proof. I would welcome thoughts and reasons for any skepticism in regard to the *Old Testament’s* textual history as it relates to the findings above.

3. If one finds the interpretation and scholarly consensus offered above convincing, one might suggest that the vision means to suggest that the “great and abominable church” limited its changes to the *New Testament*, leaving the *Old Testament* as it was received.

This position faces at least two difficulties. First, I simply do not see any indication that the vision makes this sort of subtle distinction. This would be an assumption based upon preference rather than fact.

We have already seen that the Bible was “like unto the engravings which are upon the plates of brass”—a purely Jewish, Old Testament, pre-Christian document. Elsewhere, Nephi describes the brass plates’ content: “the five books of Moses,” “a record of the Jews from the beginning, even down to the commencement of the reign of Zedekiah,” “the prophecies of the holy prophets, from the beginning, even down to the commencement of the reign of Zedekiah,” and “many prophecies which have been spoken by the mouth of Jeremiah.”⁸

It does not seem unreasonable to assume that alterations made to the Bible spoken of in the vision—a Bible that is “like unto the engravings which are upon the plates of brass”—included alterations to the Old Testament. In addition, one might ask, “Why would the “great and abominable church” only make changes to the New Testament, while leaving the Old untouched”?

It seems that any suggestion implying that the vision intimates that only the *New* Testament was altered during the Christian era demands a convincing argument to demonstrate such subtlety in the text. Otherwise, the suggestion is simply, as we have said, a matter of person preference without sound evidentiary reasons. I suppose some might say it is a matter of “faith.”

Now, faith is not an illegitimate bases upon which to think and act. However, those who make the argument on such grounds should know and acknowledge what they are doing. They should acknowledge that they “feel” it in the absence of evidence—perhaps in opposition to the evidence.

At the same time, they should not be surprised by or critical of those who, with or without faith, are skeptical, and request rational explanations. It is not unreasonable or

⁸ See 1 Nephi 5.¹¹⁻¹³. We might add that, while it is not Nephi speaking, our LDS scriptures directly suggest that the Old Testament would suffer violence in the form of editorial omission of text. “In the day when the children of men shall esteem my words as naught and take many of them from the book which thou shalt write, behold, I will raise up another like unto thee, and they shall be had again among the children of men...” (Moses 1.⁴¹).

unfaithful to demand some type of evidence of the “faithful.” We are not, after all, dealing with the existence of God or some such difficult proposal that is missing hard evidence.

In addition, we should say that from a historical perspective, there is very little evidence that any individuals or institutions made significant alterations to the *New Testament* after its composition.

4. If one finds the interpretation and scholarly consensus offered above convincing, one might suggest that the literary phenomenon known as “telescoping” is taking place. Rather than going into minute and potentially confusing details and timing of the changes made to the *Old Testament* in the course of its *Jewish* handling, and changes made to the *New Testament* in the course of its *Christian* handling, the vision simplified the process and lumped the changes together, laying the blame on a single entity, the “great and abominable church”—a designation (perhaps?) for general, generic, timeless apostasy.⁹

We would remind the reader that this seems to fly in the face of the “orthodox” interpretation presented in the chapter heading: the church making unauthorized and damaging changes to the Bible was one “set up among the Gentiles.” The reader is welcome to argue that the chapter heading is not “canonical,” but they should know that they are swimming upstream when they so casually dismiss the heading.

The difficulty here is that this explanation is wholly in response to the need to lessen the tension between text and historical findings. It is not drawn out of an independent reading of the text. One suspects that minus the tension found between the text and the historical record—a tension that did not exist in Joseph Smith’s day—such an explanation would not be sought or considered. It would not leap independently from the text. Therefore, it seems reactionary and apologetically motivated rather than textually and contextually driven.

⁹ It does seem best to see the “great and abominable church” as representing institutions other than those that we today would designate as “religious.” It is clear from the Old Testament that “idolatry”—usually thought of in only religious terms today—included such institutions as those we think of today as “governmental,” or “economical.”

5. If one finds the interpretation and scholarly consensus offered above convincing, one could conclude that the vision of 1 Nephi 13.²⁰⁻²⁹ is “wrong” about the Bible’s textual history.

Admittedly, this raises uncomfortable questions concerning the Book of Mormon, what it is, and how it came to be.

Nevertheless, at this stage, it is the explanation that seems most likely.

Perhaps there are other reasonable explanations. I would welcome ideas.

Implications of 1 Nephi 13.²⁰⁻²⁹ being wrong for our understanding of how the book of Mormon came to be

We began this essay with a list of explanations that have been offered for how the Book of Mormon came to be. As a reminder, they are:

1. Inspired ancient authors wrote on metal plates, which were then translated by Joseph Smith by means of some type of “mechanical” process—urim and thummim, and/or seer stone. This, of course, is the earliest and most orthodox.
2. Inspired ancient authors wrote on metal plates, which were then translated by Joseph Smith by means of some type of intersection between the text and the translator himself.
3. An inspired Joseph Smith wrote the Book. This is the newest of the proposals.
4. An un-inspired Joseph Smith wrote the Book on his own.
5. The literary work of some other un-inspired 19th century author—Sidney Rigdon, Solomon Spaulding, Ethen Smith, etc.—served as foundation and inspiration for Joseph Smith, who authored the Book.
6. An un-inspired Joseph Smith wrote the Book using some type of channeling process initiated by some demonic spirit.

Does the assumed error of 1 Nephi 13.²⁰⁻²⁹ help as we address this bigger question of origin

and authorship? If so, how? Below are a few of my thoughts on this bigger question of origin.

1. If we accept that “inspired ancient authors wrote on metal plates, which were then translated by Joseph Smith by means of some type of “mechanical” process—urim and thummim, and/or seer stone,” then it was ancient authors that were wrong about the textual history of the Bible.

No doubt this causes tension and difficulties. We might argue that “inspiration” is more often than not general rather than specific. One can get the general point right but err in the details. What is important is that the ancient authors saw that the Bible was compromised along its transmission path. If the ancient authors were wrong in the details of that corruption, they got the larger point right.

We might, then, adjust our “expectations” in regard to “inspiration” and “revelation.” It is not inerrant. It is not always exactly “factual” in every point all of the time. It is dependent upon the perceptions and understanding of the fallible people who receive the revelation. Revelation is only as good as the understanding of the individual receiving it. God does not always get hung up if all the details aren’t exactly “correct,” so long as the greater truths are communicated. He may allow faulty inspiration to go uncorrected, mostly because, given the individuals he has to work with, if he corrected every fault, he would have no time to do anything else.

Of course Nephi’s futuristic visions, including this one of 1 Ne. 13.²⁰⁻²⁹, are so very, very specific. It is difficult—though I suppose not impossible—to imagine that the visionary is so inspired to see into the future with such detail but then get one of the details so thoroughly wrong. We must then ask the additional question. If the ancient visionary got this fact wrong, what else did he get wrong?

2. If we believe that “inspired ancient authors wrote on metal plates, which were then translated by Joseph Smith by means of some type of intersection between the text and the translator himself, then we could reason that it was Joseph Smith that is responsible for this particular error.

The argument would be something as follows. In the translation process Joseph Smith

is receiving “impressions,” perhaps as through a glass darkly—pun intended. These inspired impressions then interact with Joseph’s personal knowledge, biases, and experiences. He senses from Nephi’s vision that the Bible as he has it is not as it was originally. Joseph is then allowed to fill in the blanks as he understands them.

As a colonial or post-colonial man, Joseph has been taught and shares all the prejudices against Catholicism or, as they might say “pope-ism.” So he assumes that the alterations made to the Bible are attributable to the “dark ages of Catholicism.”

Once more, God speaks a general truth and does not correct the receiver, this time Joseph, if every detail isn’t precisely right.

Of course, tensions still abound in this explanation. We would be required to ask, once more, “If Joseph got this detail wrong, how many others are wrong?”

Of course, this type of approach to “revelation” puts an unbelievable, and, perhaps, unreasonable responsibility on the reader. The reader is expected to get the big point, which perhaps becomes an “article of faith,” without taking all the details themselves as “articles of faith.” He is expected to know when to take something at face value and when to be cautious about what he is reading. This is asking a great deal, especially when the one *receiving* the inspiration in the first place is apparently not under any responsibility to be clear about what he is doing and how he is doing it.

Don’t get me wrong, it might be that asking individuals to be just this responsible is wholly appropriate. But, again, we should understand what we are saying and what we are asking. This has far reaching implications—I will mention one or two in my conclusion.

3. It would seem that if we conclude that “an *inspired* Joseph Smith wrote the Book,” all the tensions and difficulties of our previous two explanations apply. They are simply transferred to a new stage.

4. Assuming that “an *uninspired* Joseph Smith wrote the Book on his own” might seem to best explain the discrepancy or tension between the vision and the facts as they seem to be. But, this one, it seems, comes with some difficult tensions as well—tensions

independent of faith, but of fact.

For me, it is very nearly as much an act of faith to believe that an uninspired Joseph Smith wrote the Book as it is to say that he translated it from ancient plates. From what I have seen of his earliest personal writings, and from what others—friends, family, and foes alike—have said about his “educational” development, it is very difficult to believe he wrote the Book at this early stage of his life.

As I read his early writings, I can very much agree with Emma’s assertion that at this early stage of life Joseph Smith “could neither write nor dictate a coherent and well-worded letter; let alone dictating a book like the Book of Mormon.”¹⁰ She seems to be telling the truth when she refers to Joseph as “ignorant and unlearned.”¹¹ Given the state of the frontier in which he was raised, he is not unusual in this regard.

Not only is it difficult to reasonably see Joseph possessing a *literary* capacity to write the Book, but it is perhaps even more difficult to see him possessing the *theological* capacity at this early period of his life. Perhaps he could have pulled it off in 1844, but 1829?¹² I don’t know.

5. If we conclude that the work of some other uninspired 19th century author—Sidney Rigdon, Solomon Spaulding, Ethen Smith, etc.—served as foundation and inspiration for Joseph Smith, who authored the Book, many of the difficulties of the previous suggestions remain.

In addition, similarities between the Book of Mormon and Solomon Spaulding’s “Manuscript Story,” or Ethan Smith’s “View of the Hebrews” are so slight and of such a general nature that one is still essentially left maintaining that Joseph Smith wrote the Book of Mormon. The narrative parallels are not as strong as some have claimed, it seems to me. And for sure neither of the aforementioned 19th century works contain anywhere near the “theological” interest, thoughtfulness, or complexity that is found in

¹⁰ Reference Welsh?

¹¹ Bushman, p. 96.

¹² For me, even the Joseph Smith that produced the Doctrine and Covenants is only rarely up to the theological insight possessed by the Book of Mormon. And, again, his personal writings and musings even of his last years are almost always of an inferior theological stature to those of the Book of Mormon.

the Book of Mormon. Again, we would have to assume that this theological complexity came from the Joseph Smith of 1829. It is a difficult conclusion to evince.

And all of this leaves aside the uncertain evidence that Joseph Smith was even aware of and familiar with such works.

6. To believe that “an uninspired Joseph Smith wrote the Book using some type of channeling process initiated by some demonic spirit” is as much an act of faith as believing that he saw an angel who presented him with metal plates. This one will only work for the believer in the supernatural, and is, again, simply a matter of preference.

This one is, of course, immediately rejected by anyone looking for some rational explanation for the Books origins.

In addition, it is difficult to square with the Book’s positive view of God and Christ.

So, where does all of this leave us? In a very difficult place, it seems to me. No matter which way we turn, we are met with unexplainable difficulties and tensions. No proposal is entirely satisfactory. There is some strange, tension-filled thing going on here. Perhaps Joseph Smith himself was wise to say only that the Book of Mormon was “translated”¹³ through the “gift and power of God”¹⁴ and through the “mercy of God, by the power of God.”¹⁵

Concluding thoughts

Following are a few thoughts and conclusions that I draw from the text and the historical information as we understand them.

¹³ We place “translated” in quotation marks, because it seems clear that Joseph did not mean by “translate” what we think of when we speak of “translation.” One need look no further than Joseph’s “translation” of the Bible to appreciate the different. Joseph would seem to mean something more akin to “transmission” than “translation.”

¹⁴ Title Page to the Book of Mormon

¹⁵ DC 1.²⁹

As I have already indicated, it is difficult to understand the vision of 1 Nephi 13.²⁰⁻²⁹ to mean anything but that the Bible—Old and New Testaments—left the Apostles’ hands “pure,” but was then corrupted by a post-apostolic institution that, it seems to me, we have no choice but to conclude was the Catholic Church.

At the same time, the facts as I understand them provide no reason to believe that this actually took place. The evidence suggests that the Catholic Church and/or every other post-apostolic institution were faithful transmitters of the text, and left us, essentially, the same Bible they inherited. There is no evidence whatsoever that the Catholic Church actively suppressed any “plain and precious” truths by removing them from the Bible. Such theories would seem to belong to the realm of conspiracy theories so popular in modern culture.

I find it difficult to square Joseph Smith having authored the Book on his own with the facts as I understand them.

It seems that in order to produce the Book, Joseph Smith would have required some type of assistance—natural and human, or supernatural.

I find it difficult to square Joseph Smith having produced the Book with assistance from any of the proposed human sources.

I find it impossible to square the book’s incredible witness of Christ with its having been inspired by an evil source.

This leaves me with the conclusion that Joseph Smith produced the Book with supernatural assistance. Now, there are certainly times when the Book of Mormon seems to reflect 19th century attitudes and religious ideas that could have originated with Joseph Smith and his religious experiences and biases. At the same time, there are times when the Book of Mormon seems to perceive things that go beyond Joseph Smith’s 1830 capabilities and perceptions.¹⁶ There is theological sophistication that goes well beyond those that a Joseph Smith of 1830 could have produced.

But what do we do at other times when we are faced with discrepancies between the

¹⁶ In separate homilies and devotionals, I discuss the concept of “prosperity” as it is understood in the Book of Mormon. Its understanding of the concept seems identical to that of the Old Testament. This just seems beyond Joseph Smith’s 1830 scriptural expertise.

assertions made by the text—the one we have looked at in this essay is not the only one—and “facts on the ground”?

Is there an explanation that fits an impression that the Book was produced by Joseph Smith with “supernatural” aid, but that the Book contains errors of fact?

I conclude that there was some type of complex interplay between inspiration—whether through the medium of a sacred text or that of a channeling influence, the Holy Spirit... you choose... and Joseph Smith’s own understandings, themselves often confused and errant. The compositional process was not mechanical. Joseph Smith and his perspectives play about in the text, twisting and turning, mixing and combining in complex ways with divine insights. God seems O.K. with this. To me, this is another of the many evidences of his mercy and grace.

But this makes for difficult reading.

Having come to this conclusion, we are reminded of the need for caution. Dogmatism is inappropriate even in the presence of “revelation.” The reality of divine revelation is always intertwined with the understanding, errors and prejudices of the one receiving the revelation—to say nothing of those who read it later. Revelation is always provisional.¹⁷ It is rarely “pure” and “whole.” It is always subject to change, to clarification, to reinterpretation, and to faithful and searching criticism.

Traditional Christianity balks at such attitudes toward their precious Bible’s dead prophets. Latter-day Saints balk at such attitudes toward their beloved living prophets. But all that balking may simply be indicative of faithless and fearful and lazy minds. It may be indicative of our desire to find and take the easiest path.

This thing we call “scripture study” requires real, dedicated, thoughtful, and energetic effort. It requires time and experience. It requires a searching and open mind. It requires boldness. It requires much more than most are willing to give. There are other pursuits that tempt us

¹⁷ It is marvelous when revelation itself reminds of this reality. We appreciate Joseph Smith’s candid admission that “I was left thus, without being able to decide whether... or...” (DC 130.¹⁵), Alma’s honest “I give it as my opinion” (Alma 40.²⁰), or Paul’s unsure “whether in the body, I cannot tell, or whether out of the body, I cannot tell” (2 Cor. 12.²).

away from a dedicated study of the word of God to our great, great loss.

^a Each time the Spirit or the angel invite Nephi to “Look,” I reckon a new vision with a new perspective or emphasis. By this scheme, the visions are outlined as follows.

1st Vision—The Tree (1 Ne. 11.⁸⁻¹¹)

2nd Vision—The Virgin (1 Ne. 11.¹²⁻¹⁸)

3rd Vision—The Child (1 Ne. 11:19-23)

4th Vision—The Ministry of Christ with Attendant Word (1 Ne. 11.²⁴⁻²⁵)

5th Vision—The Ministry of Christ with Attendant Holy Spirit (1 Ne. 11.²⁶⁻²⁹)

6th Vision—The Ministry of Christ with Attendant Angelic Ministry (1 Ne. 11.³⁰)

7th Vision—The Ministry of Christ with Attendant Healings (1 Nep. 11.³¹)

8th Vision—The Ministry of Christ with Attendant Death and Apostolic Persecution (1 Ne. 11.³²⁻³⁶)

9th Vision—The New World in Apostasy, Christ’s Ministry in America with Attendant Apostolic Ministry (1 Ne. 12.¹⁻¹⁰)

10th Vision—The New World Apostasy after Christ’s Ministry (1 Ne. 12.¹¹⁻²³)

11th Vision—The Day of the Gentiles (1 Ne. 13.^{1-14.7})

12th Vision— The Mother of Abominations (1 Ne. 14.⁸⁻¹⁷)

13th Vision—John the Revelator (1 Ne. 14.¹⁸⁻³⁰)

What we seem to have here, are twelve visions of God’s salvation history with a thirteenth vision—a kind of addendum—affirming that there were more visions granted, but that only twelve are recorded.