

MISGUIDED ZEAL AND DEFENSE OF THE CHURCH

Editor's Note: This paper is the full version of the executive summary available in PDF format at http://www.fairlds.org/Book_of_Mormon/MisguidedS.pdf.

The Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research (FAIR) is a volunteer organization of Latter-day Saints and other interested supporters that provides well-researched, well-documented answers to questions and criticisms directed at The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Members of FAIR are committed to the proposition that the Book of Mormon is divine scripture and that the Church of Jesus Christ is the Lord's true church with the essential authority and doctrines necessary to access the atonement of our only Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

FAIR is an organization of individuals, not a collective mind. Members of FAIR share a faith in the restored gospel, but have differing opinions on many issues, including scriptural interpretation and many issues surrounding Church history and doctrine. FAIR does not have an "official position" on anything that is not fundamental to the restored Gospel. For example, FAIR believes the Book of Mormon to be divine scripture but has no position on where the events recorded in the Book of Mormon took place, exactly how the divine translation process operated, what DNA evidence (if any) exists for the Book of Mormon, or what a given verse of scripture "means."

Most attacks on the restored gospel focus on these types of peripheral issues. FAIR believes that where revealed answers are not available there may well be more than one intellectually and spiritually satisfying resolution for a troubling issue: we are frequently reminded of this, because we don't always agree among ourselves about what the "best" such resolution is.

Members of the Church should feel free to study, pray, and reflect upon any and all issues related to their faith. We do not believe that insisting upon a uniformity of thought and interpretation (save in the basics required of all faithful Church members) is necessary, healthy, or consistent with the liberty granted us by the restored gospel or the doctrine of moral agency. In this spirit, FAIR sometimes publishes articles with which not all members of FAIR agree. We often have two authors approach the same issue from different perspectives that are mutually incompatible—both cannot be right. This provides our readers with a breadth of thought on topics about which the Church has no official position.

Having said this, FAIR is concerned when material is presented—in a sincere but naïve attempt to support the truth claims of the Church of Jesus Christ—based on invalid or

misunderstood data and reasoning. The problem is significantly compounded when those who make such attempts believe and claim they are inspired by God to do so.

If members of the Church or sincere investigators are told, for instance, that a certain set of facts or scientific findings support the gospel, they may later feel misled or deceived when they learn that those facts have been misrepresented or misinterpreted. If they are encouraged to anchor their faith to the sands of a flawed argument, when the truth washes the sand away the believer's faith may go with it.

All secular knowledge is subject to change, refinement, and improvement. There is nothing wrong with using the best evidence to support a position, only to have further information show that we were in error, so long as we acknowledge that our efforts are secular and not spiritual. It is spiritually dangerous, however, to allow claims or theories that we know or believe to be misleading or false to go unchallenged. Members of the Church must value the truth above everything else, and we should not support or encourage belief in the Church for invalid reasons.

As Elder Oaks noted, "truth is better served by silence than by a bad argument."¹ When someone is worried about a particular attack on the Church, there is a natural tendency to seek for an answer—any answer. Anything that seems plausible may be seized upon, because it may seem that the only alternative is not to have an answer at all. But, as Elder Oaks said, it is in fact better to remain silent than give a flawed answer. A wrong answer is worse than no answer.

Experience shows that when members or investigators base their faith on theories grounded in shallow reasoning or misrepresentation of scientific research, faith in the Church is unnecessarily shaken when that shallowness and misrepresentation is discovered. Avoiding bad arguments, and waiting patiently on the Lord, is the better tactic.²

We are sure and know that the Book of Mormon has been and will be confirmed spiritually for sincere seekers. There is also much solid, verified secular evidence that provides additional reasons for the testimony we have of Joseph Smith's prophetic calling. The cause of Christ is not helped—and may be harmed—by defenses that are not as accurate and forthright as they should be.

RESPONDING TO A PUBLIC NEED

FAIR provides an "Ask the Apologist" service to which people frequently send questions to be considered and answered by our volunteers. In addition to providing help for individuals, this allows us to have a sense for what issues are troubling Latter-day Saints. In recent

¹ Dallin H. Oaks, "Alternate Voices," *Ensign* (May 1989): 28.

² As President Joseph F. Smith observed, "It sometimes takes almost as much courage to wait as to act. It is to be hoped, then, that the leaders of God's people, and the people themselves, will not feel that they must have at once a solution of every question that arises to disturb the even tenor of their way." [Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1970), 156.]

months many well-meaning individuals have asked us why FAIR has not endorsed *DNA Evidence for Book of Mormon Geography*, a DVD created and promoted by Rodney Meldrum.³ To those unfamiliar with DNA science, population genetics, and the historical facts, the information presented in the DVD may appear plausible and welcome.

Frankly, we wish we could support the ideas presented in the DVD. If they were valid, they would add a substantial material witness to the authenticity of the Book of Mormon. Unfortunately, after having reviewed the material, examined the existing Latter-day Saint and scientific literature, and consulted with experts in the relevant fields, we cannot do so.

After carefully and thoroughly reviewing his presentation, FAIR has unreservedly concluded the following:

- Mr. Meldrum has attempted to assert revelation for those outside of his stewardship, and has used that revelation as a substitute for solid scholarship.
- The DVD contains much material that is misrepresented because the author is unfamiliar with the large body of work—produced over decades by faithful Latter-day Saints—that addresses the very topics he seeks to address.
- The DVD plants erroneous information, concepts, and expectations in the minds of viewers, making them easier targets for hostile critics when these errors are inevitably trumpeted by enemies of the Church.⁴

For these reasons, and due to the questions we have received from correspondents, we have concluded that Mr. Meldrum's ideas should be publicly addressed. It is vital that information about the Church—including the Book of Mormon—be as rigorous and reliable as possible. If they are not, then experience has shown that it is all too easy for future critics disprove that information and incorrectly conclude that (a) the Church endorsed the ideas that have been proven false and (b) the Book of Mormon must be false because the disproved information is false.⁵

This introductory paper is divided into two major sections. The first section addresses the theological problems inherent in Mr. Meldrum's presentation and approach to his theories. The second section presents a simple approach to scholarship that many have found beneficial over the years.

³ Rodney Meldrum, *DNA Evidence for Book of Mormon Geography: New scientific support for the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon; Correlation and Verification through DNA, Prophetic, Scriptural, Historical, Climatological, Archaeological, Social, and Cultural Evidence* (Rodney Meldrum, 2008), DVD. The DVD is in sections; citations in this paper reference the DVD's section number and title, followed by an approximate time stamp from the DVD.

⁴ This trumpeting has already begun. See Simon G. Southerton, "How DNA Divides LDS Apologists," Signature Books website, <http://www.signaturebooks.com/dna.htm> (accessed 21 June 2008).

⁵ Mr. Meldrum's material is particularly dangerous in this regard because he may be understood as believing that he has been commissioned by God to promote it. If a viewer understands that God had a hand in Mr. Meldrum's theories, then when those theories are later disproved their misplaced faith may give way to great doubts.

PART I: THEOLOGICAL PROBLEMS

Rodney Meldrum, the author and promoter of *DNA Evidence for Book of Mormon Geography*, appears sincere in his beliefs about the Book of Mormon, DNA, and a host of other issues. In the Church of Jesus Christ, we are each entitled to our beliefs and views on these or any other subject.

We are worried, however, by the means Mr. Meldrum has used to promote his beliefs. It is his actions and words, not his beliefs and convictions, which concern us.

IS THERE A REVEALED GEOGRAPHY?

Leaders of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have long been clear that there is no “revealed geography” for the Book of Mormon.⁶ Neither Joseph Smith, nor any of his successors, gave any revelation to the body of the Church about where the Book of Mormon took place, save to place it in the western hemisphere and to locate the hill in New York as the site from which Joseph retrieved the plates.

Near the beginning of his presentation, Mr. Medrum says, as he is obliged to say, “just to let you know and be perfectly clear, the Church has no official stand on geography. The Church does not endorse this work.”⁷ Yet, the next four hours of his presentation seems intended to give exactly the opposite impression. On the back of Mr. Meldrum’s DVD the following appears:

Thousands have seen it including geneticists, General Authorities, scientists, stake presidents, mission presidents [and] patriarchs.... Surveys of those who have seen the presentation express tremendous excitement about the information, stating that it ‘just makes sense’ intellectually as well as spiritually...

The DVD itself begins with positive comments from an emeritus General Authority Seventy. References to people holding responsible Church offices are clearly intended to suggest that servants of the Lord endorse this presentation, even though no express statement to that effect is made.

Even if all of these people gave Mr. Meldrum’s work their explicit encouragement and approval, which they do not, it would make no difference. In the 1950s Elder Mark E. Peterson of the Twelve noted that

We have had speculation, for instance, on the part of some with respect to Book of Mormon geography, and it is plain, unadulterated speculation and

⁶ “The Church has not taken an official position with regard to location of geographical places” of the Book of Mormon. See John E. Clark, “Book of Mormon Geography,” *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, edited by Daniel H. Ludlow, Vol. 1 (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1992), 178.

⁷ Rodney Meldrum, *DNA Evidence*, “Introduction,” 3:25–3:45.

not doctrine. And if a General Authority has speculated on Book of Mormon geography he did not represent the view of the Church while doing so.⁸

While interesting, the issue of Book of Mormon geography is not of earth-shattering importance, as President Anthony W. Ivins noted:

It does not make any difference to us. There has never been anything yet set forth that definitely settles that question. So the Church says we are just waiting until we discover the truth....As you study the Book of Mormon keep these things in mind and do not make definite statements concerning things that have not been proven in advance to be true.⁹

We believe that the comments of George Q. Cannon, a previous counselor in the First Presidency, have direct applicability:

There is a tendency, strongly manifested...among some of the brethren, to study the geography of the Book of Mormon... We are greatly pleased to notice the...interest taken by the Saints in this holy book... But valuable as is the Book of Mormon both in doctrine and history, yet it is possible to put this sacred volume to uses for which it was never intended, uses which are detrimental rather than advantageous to the cause of truth, and consequently to the work of the Lord...

The First Presidency has often been asked to prepare some suggestive map illustrative of Nephite geography, but have never consented to do so. Nor are we acquainted with any of the Twelve Apostles who would undertake such a task. The reason is, that without further information they are not prepared even to suggest [a map]. The word of the Lord or the translation of other ancient records is required to clear up many points now so obscure.¹⁰

President Joseph F. Smith "...declined to officially approve of [any Book of Mormon map], saying that the Lord had not yet revealed it, and that if it were officially approved and afterwards found to be in error, it would affect the faith of the people."¹¹

A recent letter from the secretary of the First Presidency, dated April 23, 1993, read:

The Church emphasizes the doctrinal and historical value of the Book of Mormon, not its geography. While some Latter-day Saints have looked for possible locations and explanations [for Book of Mormon geography] because

⁸ Mark E. Petersen, "Revelation," address to religious educators, 24 August 1954; cited in *Charge to Religious Educators* (Salt Lake City: Church Educational System and The Church of Jesus Christ and Latter-day Saints, 1982), 136–137; cited in *Determining Doctrine: A Reference Guide for Evaluating Doctrinal Truth*, edited by Dennis B. Horne (Roy, Utah: Eborn Books, 2005), 315.

⁹ Anthony W. Ivins, *Conference Report* (April 1929): 16.

¹⁰ George Q. Cannon, "Editorial Thoughts: The Book of Mormon Geography," 25/1 *The Juvenile Instructor* (1 January 1890): 18–19.

¹¹ George D. Pyper, "The Book of Mormon Geography," *The Instructor* 73 (April 1938): 160. Event discussed occurred in about 1918; see John L. Sorenson, *Mormon's Map* (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2000), 7.

the New York Hill Cumorah does not readily fit the Book of Mormon description of Cumorah, there are no conclusive connections between the Book of Mormon text and any specific site.¹²

Mr. Meldrum claims that God has chosen to “re-establish...Joseph Smith as the preeminent scholar on the subject of Book of Mormon geography.”¹³ It is easy to conclude from such a statement that Mr. Meldrum believes Joseph Smith gave revealed answers to the issue of Book of Mormon geography and that members *and leaders* of the Church have ignored those revelatory insights—otherwise he would see no need to “re-establish Joseph Smith.”¹⁴ Mr. Meldrum therefore takes it upon himself to correct the Church and our leaders, who for more than a century have taught that there is no revealed geography.

ASSERTING A DIVINELY REVEALED GEOGRAPHY

If Mr. Meldrum only wanted to argue from available evidence for a specific geography, he would be as welcome to do so as anyone else—and just as subject to correction by better evidence. Regretfully, Mr. Meldrum is going far beyond that, and by implication leading people to conclude that what he teaches on a subject about which the Prophets have not spoken is right, and that he is restoring revelatory insights lost to the Church and its leaders for more than a century.

In an e-mail letter to his supporters, Mr. Meldrum wrote:

Within 48 hours the Lord provided the answer to how this was to be accomplished... What a tremendous blessing!... Within 48 hours again the Lord provided another ‘miracle’ as I was talking to Val Killian, world-renowned architect... Right then *he was prompted* and he said ‘We can make it into a research lab/facility to study these artifacts!’ [the Milton R. Hunter collection from the University of Michigan] *So the Lord is watching out for this project!*¹⁵

While Mr. Meldrum may be the private beneficiary of God’s miracles, it is not appropriate to publicly reference such miracles to assert God’s support and endorsement for his efforts. His claims include an assertion that God wishes the Michigan Relics to be housed and studied as genuine artifacts—even though these relics were previously in the possession of the Church, which gave them to the University of Michigan after their identity as forgeries

¹² Correspondence from Michael Watson, Office of the First Presidency, 23 April 1993. Cited with commentary in William J. Hamblin, “Basic Methodological Problems with the Anti-Mormon Approach to the Geography and Archaeology of the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2/1 (1993): 161-197.

¹³ Rodney Meldrum, “Update and Request to Serve on the FIRM FOUNDATION Counsel,” e-mail dated 9 May 2008.

¹⁴ In an online defense of his DVD, Mr. Meldrum responded to LDS critics of his ideas by saying “Did you know that no less than three times Joseph Smith claimed to have received revelation on the matter? If you don’t know that, does it indicate poor ‘research’ on your part?” DNA Truthseeker [Rodney Meldrum], “Dna [sic] Evidence For Book Of Mormon Geography,” Mormon Apologetics and Discussion Board (MADB), 12 May 2008, <http://www.mormonapologetics.org/index.php?act=findpost&hl=&pid=1208425874> (accessed 21 June 2008).

¹⁵ Rodney Meldrum, e-mail (9 May 2008), emphasis added.

was confirmed for a second time.¹⁶ In other words, Mr. Meldrum claims that he and his associates are prompted by the spirit to do that which leaders of the Church opted not to do.

He then goes on to claim that he has received a blessing from a Church authority that divinely sanctions his work:

...I asked my dear friend [an emeritus LDS general authority] if he would give my wife and I a special blessing...[my wife] and I had the most incredible and special experience as we met [in the former general authority's home]. After talking for some time, and updating him on all the latest developments, he and Brother [name omitted] gave us the most incredible blessing imaginable.

They were incredibly powerful and caused both [my wife] and I to *no longer doubt the validity the of work* [sic] in which we are engaged. The only thing I can share from the blessings is that the overall understanding is that *this information will go out to "millions"* who will be touched by the work, and that this will "embolden" the saints to open their mouths and *declare anew the truthfulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ* so that *millions will find and enter his kingdom!* The spirit was overwhelmingly wonderful and we felt so blessed to have that privilege.¹⁷

There is much here that is problematic. Mr. Meldrum insists that the blessing affirms "the validity [of] the...work." Most Latter-day Saints know that the recitation of the contents of a blessing to others with the intention of convincing them that one's course is in harmony with the powers of heaven is absolutely forbidden by scripture.

Mr. Meldrum also states that millions will "declare anew the truthfulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ." It would only need to be declared *anew* if it weren't being declared *now*, something that should astonish any missionary-minded Latter-day Saint.

The information revealed by his e-mail is important because it enables Mr. Meldrum's intended audiences to know exactly what he thinks and believes. It makes little difference whether such claims to revelation are made to a few or many—doing so is inappropriate.

If a Book of Mormon geography were to be divinely revealed, such a revelation will not come through Mr. Meldrum or—with respect—from an emeritus general authority or, as Elder Petersen said, from any general authority—any more than it would come from Hugh Nibley or FAIR or the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Studies (formerly FARMS). It would come through he who has the keys and authority to receive revelation for the Church: its Prophet-President, Thomas S. Monson.

¹⁶ See Michigan Historical Museum, "The Michigan Relics—Controversy Revived—How did the relics come to the Michigan Historical Museum," <http://www.sos.state.mi.us/history/michrelics/revived.html> (accessed 21 June 2008). More details on the Michigan Relics can be found in FAIR's detailed response to Mr. Meldrum's theories, in Section 6.

¹⁷ Rodney Meldrum, e-mail (9 May 2008), emphasis added.

THERE IS DIVINE ORDER IN THE CHURCH

Is it appropriate to use private blessings from emeritus general authorities to persuade others to accept our personal projects or beliefs? We believe not. From the days of Hiram Page onward¹⁸ the Church has always had to contend with members who believe that *they* have a right to revelation that should be used publicly to influence the course of the Church. President Joseph F. Smith warned:

No doctrine is a doctrine of this Church until it has been accepted as such by the Church, and *not even a revelation from God should be taught to his people until it has first been approved by the presiding authority*—the one through whom the Lord makes known His will for the guidance of the saints as a religious body. The spirit of revelation may rest upon any one, and teach him or her many things for *personal comfort and instruction*. But these are not doctrines of the Church, and, however true, *they must not be inculcated* [taught or distributed] until proper permission is given.¹⁹

President Joseph F. Smith warned further:

No man possessing a correct understanding of the spirit of the gospel and of the authority and law of the Holy Priesthood will attempt for one moment to run before his file leader or to do anything that is not in strict harmony with his wish and the authority that belongs to him. The moment a man in a subordinate position begins to usurp the authority of his leader, that moment he is out of his place, and proves by his conduct that he does not comprehend his duty, that he is not acting in the line of his calling, *and is a dangerous character*.²⁰

President Smith condemned efforts to override prophetic authority:

We can accept nothing as authoritative but that which comes directly through the appointed channel, the constituted organizations of the Priesthood, which is the channel that God has appointed through which to make known His mind and will to the world... And the moment that individuals look to any other source, that moment they throw themselves open to the seductive influences of Satan, and render themselves liable to become servants of the devil; they lose sight of the true order through which the blessings of the Priesthood are to be enjoyed; they step outside of the pale of the kingdom of God, and are on dangerous ground. Whenever you see a man rise up claiming to have received direct revelation from the Lord to the

¹⁸ See D&C 28.

¹⁹ Joseph F. Smith Correspondence, Personal Letterbooks, 93–94, Film Reel 9, Ms. F271; cited in *Determining Doctrine: A Reference Guide for Evaluating Doctrinal Truth*, edited by Dennis B. Horne (Roy, Utah: Eborn Books, 2005), 221–222, emphasis added.

²⁰ Smith, *Gospel Doctrine*, 185, emphasis added.

Church, independent of the order and channel of the Priesthood, *you may set him down as an imposter.*²¹

FAIR has not and would not say that, but we allow that President Smith has and could.

Mr. Meldrum also makes reference in his e-mail to “reading my patriarchal blessing.” Leaders of the Church have been clear that patriarchal blessings are for individuals and their families only.²² President Harold B. Lee cautioned that blessings are “never given for publication and, as all patriarchal blessings, should be kept as a private possession to the one who has received it.”²³

SEEKING FOR SIGNS

Owing to the success of distributing his DVD and conducting his firesides, Mr. Meldrum decided to work full time on his promotion efforts. In his e-mail to select supporters he described his decision to leave his employer and work on his Book of Mormon project full time:

It was clear that I was going to have to leave [my full-time employment] to work on these [Book of Mormon] projects full time, *but I wanted more of a 'sign' from the Lord.* So I had three big projects about to close...and I told the Lord that if he wants me to make this project my #1 priority to please cause that none of these jobs go through, but that if I was to stay...to let at least one come in.²⁴

The Saints have long been cautioned about seeking signs; that Mr. Meldrum would do so is problematic. It is even more troubling that he would document his sign-seeking and share it with his supporters.

DISMISSING THE SCHOLARS

Mr. Meldrum believes in a North American setting for the Book of Mormon, and he feels that his belief is confirmed by revelation. It is no secret that for the past fifty years the general consensus of most LDS scholars has been that the setting for the Book of Mormon is in Central America.

One organization that has been key in providing secular evidences for the veracity of the Book of Mormon over the past quarter century has been the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS), recently renamed as the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship. FARMS started as an independent organization in 1979 and was asked to become a part of Brigham Young University in 1997 by President Gordon B. Hinckley. As a part of BYU the board of trustees for the Maxwell Institute includes and is accountable to the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve.

²¹ Smith, *Gospel Doctrine*, 41-42, emphasis added.

²² See Boyd K. Packer, “The Stake Patriarch,” *Ensign* (November 2002): 42.

²³ Clyde J. Williams, ed., *The Teachings of Harold B. Lee* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1996), 430.

²⁴ Rodney Meldrum, e-mail (9 May 2008), emphasis added.

As one of the focal points of LDS scholarship into the Book of Mormon, Mr. Meldrum has been asked by people what FARMS thinks of his theories. In his e-mail to supporters he discussed this issue:

Many people have asked ‘What does FARMS think of your research’ and my response is that I have not heard anything at all from them, *but after much prayer, I know* that we are not to attempt to ‘convert’ FARMS, but rather to establish a new organization of those espousing a North American Book of Mormon setting that ‘competes’ in the realm of ideas with FARMS.

Within 48 hours the Lord provided the answer to how this was to be accomplished....²⁵

It is apparent that Mr. Meldrum, rather than approach FARMS directly with his research, decided—after much prayer—to leave FARMS alone. It would be troubling enough that a researcher would choose to sequester himself from what has historically been an important center of LDS scholarship, but that is not the only troubling thing about Mr. Meldrum’s solution.

Notice that how Mr. Meldrum is to treat FARMS is “known” to him “after much prayer.” The implication from such a statement is that Mr. Meldrum is saying that God told him, by revelation, what to do about FARMS. As was earlier shown, Mr. Meldrum’s previous revelations removed the need for him to engage the existing body of scholarly research; this revelation removes the need to even deal with the scholars themselves.

When Mr. Meldrum says God told him “not to attempt to ‘convert’ FARMS,” the implication is that FARMS must need converting. If Mr. Meldrum feels that FARMS needs converting (away from error and toward the truth he possesses), it seems odd that he would cut himself off from existing scholarship and scholars.

POISONING THE WELL

Mr. Meldrum doesn’t stop there, however. He not only cuts himself off from the scholars, but seeks to turn his audiences away from the scholars, as well. In his presentation he says:

This is the kind of stuff that the anti-Mormons just love. They love to see our LDS scholars dismissing Joseph Smith because they know, they can see these things that Joseph Smith has written and they’re not being followed by the scholarly community of the church, unfortunately.²⁶

Mr. Meldrum is accusing “the scholarly community of the Church” with “dismissing Joseph Smith” and by so doing helping anti-Mormons. The community of scholars that he charges with such religious malfeasance includes the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship. It is problematic for Mr. Meldrum that the General Authorities charged with overseeing the Institute don’t agree with his assessment. In March 2008, Elder Bruce C. Hafen of the First Quorum of Seventy said:

²⁵ Rodney Meldrum, e-mail (9 May 2008), emphasis added.

²⁶ Rodney Meldrum, *DNA Evidence*, section 3, “Joseph Smith,” 36:18.

I have cheered since first hearing that there would be a Neal A. Maxwell Institute. I've known the people in this institute a long time, and to see those people and that name come together, warms my heart. I'm very grateful for your work. I know how very much Elder Maxwell admired it. *It is a great blessing not only to BYU, but throughout the Church.*²⁷

It is not surprising that the Church's official website responding to the DNA issue includes articles by Matt Roper, Dr. John Sorenson, and Dr. Jeff Lindsay, all of whom Mr. Meldrum quotes with disapproval.²⁸

In his dismissal of the LDS scholarly community, Mr. Meldrum also implicitly charges Church leaders with wasting Church funds through research targeted at Central America:

Now there's been millions and millions of dollars have been spent in a vain attempt to show the Book of Mormon happened in Central America. My hope is, is that with this DNA, and the DVD and the information here, that we can at least have some discussion about the Book of Mormon being where Joseph Smith, and the Book of Mormon itself, testify that it happened.²⁹

This waste of tithe monies at BYU and elsewhere, it seems, could have been avoided if the prophets and apostles had only heeded Joseph's supposed revelation about the geography.

In his presentation Mr. Meldrum quotes three examples of how he feels the scholarly community have fallen in "discounting or disdaining Joseph's knowledge." His disapproves, for example, of the following:

Exactly what Joseph Smith believed at different times in his life concerning Book of Mormon geography in general is also indeterminable... Evidently, Joseph Smith's views on this matter were open to further knowledge.³⁰

Despite Mr. Meldrum's disapproval, the Church has long held there was no Book of Mormon geography revealed to Joseph. Not surprisingly, LDS scholars say exactly the same thing.

Mr. Meldrum is very pointed in his criticism of a single quote, feeling that it illustrates perfectly how LDS scholars have dismissed and abandoned Joseph Smith:

²⁷ Bruce C. Hafen, "Annual Maxwell Institute Lecture, Brigham Young University, "Reason, Faith, and the Things of Eternity," Provo, Utah (21 March 2008), emphasis added. On-line at http://farms.byu.edu/Elder_Hafen_Mar_21_2008/ (accessed 21 June 2008).

²⁸ "DNA and the Book of Mormon," *newsroom.lds.org* (16 February 2006). On-line at <http://newsroom.lds.org/ldsnewsroom/eng/commentary/dna-and-the-book-of-mormon> (accessed 21 June 2008).

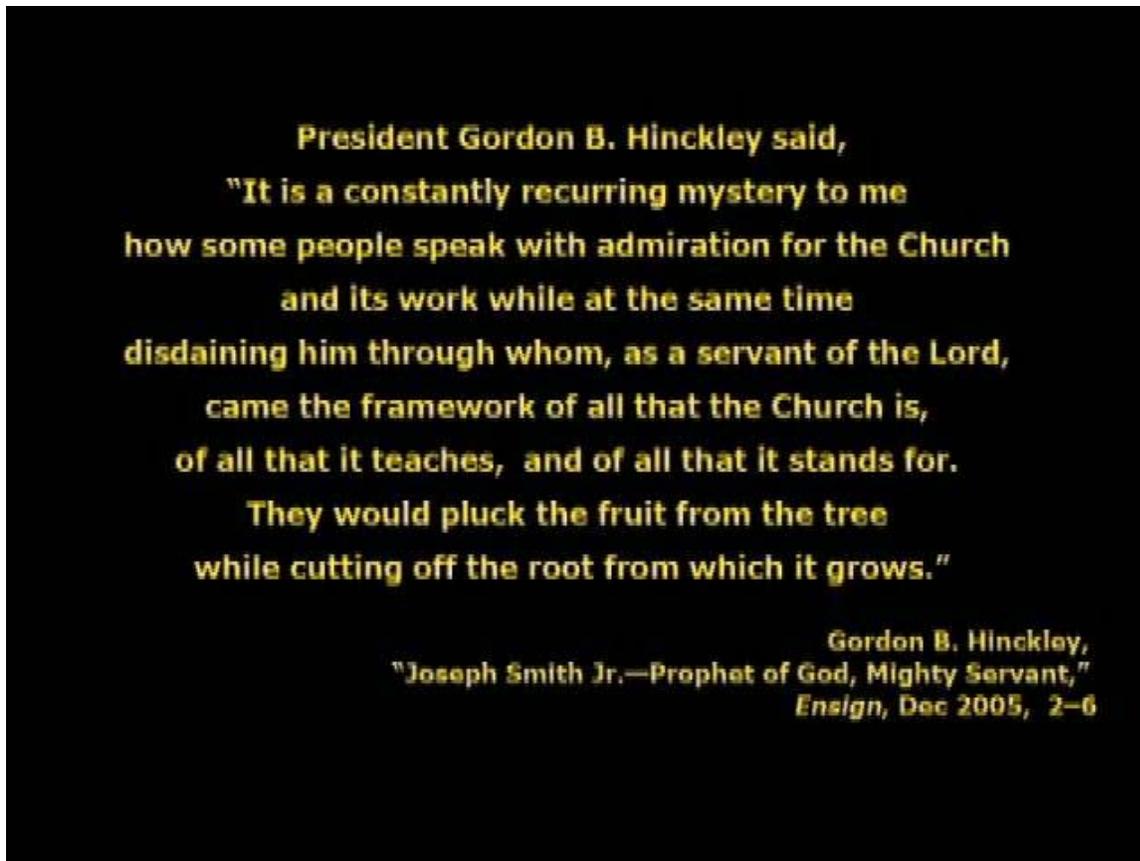
²⁹ Rodney Meldrum, *DNA Evidence*, section 17, "Conclusion," 4:20-4:45.

³⁰ Rodney Meldrum, *DNA Evidence*, section 3, "Joseph Smith," 36:45. Mr. Meldrum is citing, without attribution, Kenneth W. Godfrey, "The Zelph Story," *Brigham Young University Studies* 29/ 2 (Spring 1989): 48. Mr. Meldrum also cites, without attribution, Matthew Roper, "Nephi's Neighbors: Book of Mormon Peoples and Pre-Columbian Populations," *FARMS Review of Books* 15/ 2 (2003): 91-128 and on-line author Jeff Lindsay, "Nugget #11: What Could Joseph Smith Have Known about Mesoamerica?" *www.jefflindsay.com*; on-line at <http://www.jefflindsay.com/bme11.shtml> (accessed 21 June 2008).

The historical sources give no indication that Moroni's instructions to young Joseph Smith included geography, nor did Joseph Smith claim inspiration on the matter. Ideas he later expressed about the location of events reported in the book apparently reflected his own best thinking.³¹

This quote is from John Sorenson's *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon*. According to Mr. Meldrum, "this book is the modern day foundation of Mesoamerican Book of Mormon geography theory." This is untrue, as there have been many Mesoamerican theories dating well before Sorenson's time.

To Mr. Meldrum, Sorenson's view is heresy and, notwithstanding the consistent position of the leaders of the Church, he invokes no less a person than Gordon B. Hinckley in support of his view: "So, this is the *Ensign*, December of 2005. President Gordon B. Hinckley, that's what he had to say about *this*. He says..."³²



Mr. Meldrum then undertakes to tell us what President Hinckley meant in this quote:

³¹ Rodney Meldrum, *DNA Evidence*, section 3, "Joseph Smith," 37:15. The underline appears on the visual provided by Mr. Meldrum. He is citing John Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1985), 1.

³² Rodney Meldrum, *DNA Evidence*, section 3, "Joseph Smith," 37:50, emphasis added.

Now, who is he talking about here? Is he talking about anti-Mormons here? Well, whoever these people are, they have plucked the fruit. They've already received some of the fruit. But they're cutting off the roots. That is my bottom line. Joseph knew...³³

He doesn't say that it is the anti-Mormons to whom President Hinckley refers, he effectively asks if that could be possible: "Is he talking about anti-Mormons here?" If he isn't, then he must be referring to scholars who are believing and faithful Latter-day Saints. After all, Mr. Meldrum uses this quote right after displaying various quotes by LDS scholars.

Lest it be thought that Mr. Meldrum's point could be missed, one FAIR volunteer attended a fireside conducted by Mr. Meldrum. When Mr. Meldrum asked rhetorically, "Who is [President Hinckley] talking about here?" a woman in the audience seated next to the volunteer gasped, "The scholars!" This sister clearly understood the point that Mr. Meldrum was making.

Despite Mr. Meldrum's attempt to poison the well against LDS scholars, we believe it is best to allow President Hinckley to speak for himself. The Prophet's message began:

An acquaintance said to me one day: "I admire your church very much. I think I could accept everything about it—except Joseph Smith."

To which I responded: "That statement is a contradiction. If you accept the revelation, you must accept the revelator."

It is a constantly recurring mystery to me how some people speak with admiration for the Church and its work while at the same time disdaining him through whom, as a servant of the Lord, came the framework of all that the Church is, of all that it teaches, and of all that it stands for. They would pluck the fruit from the tree while cutting off the root from which it grows.³⁴

In context, it is clear that President Hinckley is not talking about LDS scholars, but about someone who is not a member of the Church. The person he speaks of will not accept the Church (despite its fruits) because to do so would require that he accept Joseph's prophetic call—a call of which LDS scholars unreservedly bear testimony.

PART II: AN APPROACH TO SCHOLARSHIP

So far, the emphasis of this paper has been on the errors and flaws in Mr. Meldrum's tactics and theology. We now explain what someone could and should do were he interested in supporting the Book of Mormon. Any member of the Church who believes he has useful ideas about the Book of Mormon is welcome to share them as long as they respect the revelatory order of the Church. Here is how he should proceed.

³³ Rodney Meldrum, *DNA Evidence*, section 3, "Joseph Smith," 38:15.

³⁴ Gordon B. Hinckley, "Joseph Smith Jr.—Prophet of God, Mighty Servant," *Ensign* (December 2005): 2. The italicized material was omitted by Mr. Meldrum.

STEP 1: UNDERSTAND THE PROBLEM

Hugh Nibley was one of the ablest defenders of the Church, its leaders, and its doctrines. One of his greatest contributions was his example of never over-stepping divine boundaries. Nibley made it clear that revelation cannot spare us the need to do our homework:

We must know what we are doing, understand the problem, live with it, lay a proper foundation—how many a Latter-day Saint has told me that he can understand the scriptures by pure revelation and does not need to toil at Greek or Hebrew as the Prophet and the Brethren did in the School of the Prophets at Kirtland and Nauvoo?³⁵

Ideas about Book of Mormon geography are not new. Mr. Meldrum is stepping into a conversation that has been going on for almost two hundred years. He would be able to avoid a lot of wasted time, and a lot of mistakes, if he would fully examine what has already been said on this topic. However, in an August 2007 conversation with Dr. Louis Midgley Mr. Meldrum disclosed that:

- He had read a book by John Sorenson on Book of Mormon geography, but could not recall the name.
- He was not familiar with the *FARMS Review*, which has repeatedly examined various geographical models.
- He was unaware of the DNA experts published in the *FARMS Review*.
- He had not heard of John Clark or Brant Gardner and had read nothing by them, though both have published extensively on the Book of Mormon's physical setting.
- He had not constructed an “internal map” based on the Book of Mormon's text and *then* tried to fit that map to a setting, though John Clark had explained the necessity of this approach almost two decades ago.³⁶
- He had not read some of the existing scholarship about Book of Mormon geography because he did not want to be “corrupted” by previous speculation.³⁷

Mr. Meldrum does not need to adopt the ideas of those that went before, but he needs to understand *why* they had the ideas they have. He needs to understand what kind of evidence is important in order to answer the questions that interest him. Most importantly, he needs to use that evidence more persuasively than those he criticizes.

³⁵ Hugh Nibley, *Nibley on the Timely and the Timeless: Classic Essays of Hugh Nibley* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1978), 269-270.

³⁶ See John E. Clark, “A Key for Evaluating Nephite Geographies, Review of *Deciphering the Geography of the Book of Mormon*, by F. Richard Hauck,” *FARMS Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 1/1 (1989): 20-70. Creating an “internal map” based on the text of the Book of Mormon has been the approach of serious scholarship since the appearance of this article.

³⁷ Louis Midgley, “The Midgley/Mr. Meldrum Encounter,” personal notes of telephone conversation (August 2007). We thank Dr. Midgley for his notes and the opportunity to cite them here.

STEP 2: TEST CONCLUSIONS

As seen in Part I, it is improper to violate the revelatory order of the Church. While we are entitled to revelation for ourselves and those within our stewardship, it is improper for us to use revelation as a public argument for our speculative theories. Hugh Nibley was familiar with those who took an approach like Mr. Meldrum's:

Not infrequently, Latter-day Saints tell me that they have translated a text or interpreted an artifact, or been led to an archaeological discovery as a direct answer to prayer, and that for me to question or test the results is to question the reality of revelation; and often I am asked to approve a theory or "discovery" which I find unconvincing, because it has been the means of bringing people to the Church. Such practitioners are asking me to take their zeal as an adequate substitute for knowledge, but...refuse to have their knowledge tested.³⁸

According to the scriptures and repeated teachings of Presidents of the Church, our ideas or conclusions must be *tested*.³⁹ Until that is done, and until they pass the divine test, our ideas and conclusions must be considered tentative, at best. How is this testing done? In secular matters like geography, archaeology, and DNA, testing is done by examining the evidence for and against our theories.

Such testing is best done by many, not a lone individual. Scholarship is an on-going dialogue with peers. No one can claim to have the final word because we must always be ready to accept and incorporate new information.

Mr. Meldrum avoids scholarly dialogue by claiming that his ideas are approved by God. He claims that God has told him not to try to "convert FARMS." Yet, this is exactly what we must do if we have a new idea—we must try to persuade other people, by the evidence, that it is plausible. His revelations, while appropriate for personal evidence, should not be used as evidence for anyone else.

Dr. Nibley points out that this is a key part of examining secular ideas:

A professor is not one who knows, but one who professes to know, and [thus] is constantly in the position of inviting challenge.

He professes publicly where everyone is invited to come and challenge, [and] at any time he must be willing and able to defend it openly against all

³⁸ Nibley, *Timely and Timeless*, 269-270.

³⁹ See, for example, 1 Thessalonians 5:21; Alma 34:4; "I believe it is good to investigate and prove all principles that come before me. Prove all things, hold fast that which is good, and reject that which is evil, no matter what guise it may come in. I think if we, as 'Mormons,' hold principles that cannot be sustained by the Scriptures and by good sound reason and philosophy, the quicker we part with them the better, no matter who believes in them or who does not. In every principle presented to us, our first inquiry should be, 'Is it true?' 'Does it emanate from God?' If He is its Author it can be sustained just as much as any other truth in natural philosophy; if false it should be opposed and exposed just as much as any other error. Hence upon all such matters we wish to go back to first principles." [John Taylor, "Religious Conflicion, Etc.," *Journal of Discourses*, reported by David W. Evans 14 March 1869, Vol. 13 (London: Latter-Day Saint's Book Depot, 1871), 15.]

comers... A scholar [cannot] hide behind in safe immunity from any challenge.⁴⁰

Mr. Meldrum should, therefore, present his ideas in a forum in which other knowledgeable people can examine them. They could help him by pointing out areas in which his argument is weak.

Does this mean that one must be an expert, “a scholar,” or have university degrees to “prove all things and hold fast to that which is good?” Of course not. They can be helpful as they help one become knowledgeable with the body of work in a certain discipline and help one gain a certain amount of rigor in one’s research, but anyone with sufficient interest, ability, humility, and grounding is not only able but encouraged to contribute. As Dr. Nibley noted, “What on earth have a man’s name, degree, academic position, and, of all things, opinions, to do with whether a thing is true or not?”⁴¹ All that matters is the evidence.

No one should present his theories about sacred texts to members of the Church as fact when they have not examined and evaluated all available reputable work done by qualified researchers. More importantly, when matters of faith are involved, as in this case, he must also remain within the bounds set for matters of doctrine and faith applicable to all Latter-day Saints. Mr. Meldrum has done neither.

STEP 3: DON'T DISTORT OTHERS' CLAIMS

Mr. Meldrum clearly disagrees with the theories on Book of Mormon geography presented by competent and careful researchers. These researchers are frank enough to admit that not all the evidence is in and so they do not agree on everything. This is not a problem in scholarly endeavors.

When presenting his case, however, Mr. Meldrum repeatedly demonstrates that either he does not understand or he is not aware of all of the earlier, competent work on the subject. He presents his conclusions as blessed by God, but even were he to have restrained himself and remained within the bounds of secular research, he has not submitted his work for peer review—mandatory for any new theory. So, he has made what are, frankly, mistakes that have the potential to mislead his audiences.

Many Church members have probably had the experience of watching an anti-Mormon preacher talk on TV about Mormons. The preacher might say something like, “Mormons believe...” and then mention something that is ridiculous or distorted, like “Mormons believe in baptizing dead people!” He will then say (or imply), “Now, how could a reasonable person ever believe something like that?”

Latter-day Saints know that the preacher is being unfair and deceptive because they know the facts. Mormons believe in baptism for the dead, of course, but the way in which it has

⁴⁰ Hugh Nibley, “Fact and Fancy in the Interpretation of Ancient Records,” typed transcript of an address given at the third annual Religion Lecture Series at BYU on 11 November 1965, 24.

⁴¹ Hugh Nibley “New Look at the Pearl of Great Price,” *Improvement Era* (January 1968): 22.

been portrayed is unfair; it is made to look ridiculous and silly. The intention is not to understand Mormon belief, but to persuade people not to look any closer.

What the preacher is doing is presenting a *straw man*: a make-believe argument that is easy to knock down. Why? Because he is speaking to an audience unfamiliar with the topic matter he is addressing (Mormonism) and engaging straw men—instead of real issues—is easier and more effective with his audience.

It is very regrettable that, unwittingly or not, Mr. Meldrum repeatedly sets up straw men of his own. This will cause people not to look closer, because they think they know enough to make an informed decision when they, in fact, do not. Mr. Meldrum does a disservice to his audience and an injustice to the scholarship he supposedly represents.

AN IN-DEPTH EXAMINATION

As already mentioned, FAIR is troubled by Mr. Meldrum's public claims to divine guidance and revelation to fortify his theories. We are also disturbed by the fact that such claims are outside the normal revelatory channels for the Church, and yet Mr. Meldrum seeks to apply them to the Church as a whole.

What Mr. Meldrum is doing is unique in our experience. Because of the likelihood that his presentation will mislead Latter-day Saints who are understandably not familiar with the scholarship, it is within FAIR's mission to address Mr. Meldrum's claims. Were FAIR to be silent in the face of Mr. Meldrum's claims, error could be perpetuated and silence could be incorrectly viewed as consent and concurrence.

In the coming weeks FAIR will examine and respond to each of the arguments put forth by Mr. Meldrum in his firesides and DVD presentation. These responses will observe the rules we've laid out because they are the rules under which all scholarly or scientific discussions should be conducted:

1. we will define the problem (e.g., geography, DNA, archaeology)
2. we will fairly present Mr. Meldrum's views, in his own words, in context
3. we will critique any evidence presented by Mr. Meldrum
4. we will reference publications which have already addressed the claims made by Mr. Meldrum
5. we will correct Mr. Meldrum's distortion of others' views, where such distortions exist

To be clear, FAIR advocates no particular theory of Book of Mormon geography. Some of our members subscribe to one or the other, but refrain from imposing their opinions on Latter-day Saints as matters of testimony. We try, however, to point readers to resources that appear to be consistent with the present loose consensus by qualified researchers and that make no claims to divine approval.