

Comments on the Book of Mormon Witnesses: A Response to Jerald and Sandra Tanner

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Abstract: Critics of the Book of Mormon frequently claim that some of the Book of Mormon witnesses later doubted or denied their testimony of the Book of Mormon. They also claim that the activities of the Three Witnesses while out of the Church cast doubt upon the reliability of their earlier written testimony. I review evidence for these claims and also discuss the issue of what may constitute a witness of the Book of Mormon and whether the witnesses ever doubted or denied their testimony of the Book of Mormon. Evidence for later disbelief in the Book of Mormon is examined and found to be unpersuasive. Several miscellaneous issues relating to Jerald and Sandra Tanner's criticisms of the Book of Mormon are also detailed.

Last year's *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* has provoked brief but interesting comments from anti-Mormon writers Jerald and Sandra Tanner, whose book was the subject of review.¹ At that time I chided the Tanners for ignoring competent

¹ Jerald and Sandra Tanner, "Roper Attacks *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?*" *Salt Lake City Messenger* 82 (September 1992): 12–14. About a third of the Tanners' comments are lifted from their recent work *Major Problems of Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: Utah Lighthouse Ministry, 1989), 142–48. In my review I noted that, within the anti-Mormon community, the Tanners' work was thought to be significant (Matthew Roper, review of Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?* in *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 4 [1992]: 169–70). I did not suggest, as the Tanners inaccurately assert, that it was particularly significant among members of the Church. Quite frankly, most Latter-day Saints with whom I have spoken are entirely unfamiliar with the Tanners or their work. The authors, however, seem elated that fellow critic Dean Helland has described their book *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?* as "the heavyweight of all books on Mormonism," but how impressed can you really be over the praise of one who also describes Loftes Tryk as a "thinker" and one with whom he "resonated well"? Dean Helland, "Meeting the Book of Mormon



responses to their criticisms of the Book of Mormon witnesses.² Unfortunately, the Tanners' recent comments on the Three Witnesses of the Book of Mormon are also flawed for the same reason. Still, while those comments are without historical merit, they do provide an excellent opportunity to discuss several historical issues relating to the witnesses, which are significant in light of their testimonies of the Book of Mormon.

Nonofficial Witnesses of the Book of Mormon

Last year, I took issue with the misleading way the Tanners' used a citation of Brigham Young.³

Some of the witnesses of the Book of Mormon, who handled the plates and conversed with the angels of God, were afterwards left to doubt and to disbelieve that they had ever seen an angel. *One of the Quorum of the Twelve*—a young man full of faith and good works, prayed, and the vision of his mind was opened, and the angel of God came and laid the plates before him, and he saw and handled them, and saw the angel, and conversed with him as he would with one of his friends; but after all this, he was left to doubt, and plunged into apostacy [*sic*], and has continued to contend against this work. There are hundreds in a similar condition.⁴

I previously noted that the Tanners had only cited the first sentence of the statement, giving the misleading impression that

Challenge in Chile," Ph.D. diss., Oral Roberts University, 1990, 43; for an *entertaining* evaluation of Tryk's work see Daniel C. Peterson, "A Modern *Malleus maleficarum*," in *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 3 (1991): 231–60; see also Louis Midgley, "Playing with Half a Decker: The Countercult Religious Tradition Confronts the Book of Mormon," in *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 5 (1993): 116–71; Massimo Introvigne, "The Devil Makers: Contemporary Evangelical Fundamental Anti-Mormonism and Its 19th Century French Origins," unpublished paper read at the annual meeting of the Mormon History Association, May 1992, at St. George, Utah.

² Particularly, Richard Lloyd Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981). I would like to thank Dr. Anderson for his helpful comments on this article.

³ Roper, review of *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?* 171–72.

⁴ *JD* 7:164 (emphasis added).





President Young had reference to the eleven official Book of Mormon witnesses, when, in fact, the next sentence explains that he was referring to a member of the Quorum of the Twelve. None of the eleven special witnesses of the Book of Mormon was a member of the Quorum of the Twelve.⁵

The Tanners now claim that the statement shows that Young felt that “two or more of the [three] witnesses had fallen into disbelief.”⁶ But this ignores other statements by Brigham Young which affirm that the witnesses were always true to their testimonies of the Book of Mormon, even after they left the Church. “Martin Harris declared, before God and angels, that he had seen angels. Did he apostatize? Yes, *though he says that the Book of Mormon is true*. Oliver Cowdery also left the Church, *though he never denied the Book of Mormon, not even in the wickedest days he ever saw*.”⁷ Abundant evidence from interviews and personal correspondence shows that David Whitmer staunchly adhered to his testimony of the Book of Mormon and never doubted the reality of the angel and the plates,⁸ a fact that was acknowledged by early Mormon leaders.⁹ Brigham’s statement does not fit the Eight Witnesses either, since they only saw and handled the plates, while the doubters in question disbelieved “that they had ever *seen an angel*.” This makes the Tanners’ claim that Brigham had reference to one of the eleven difficult to sustain.

The Tanners, however, argue that Brigham Young’s statement refers to “different cases of apostasy. First he spoke of some of the Book of Mormon witnesses having doubt and

⁵ The Tanners complained that my criticism was unfair (p. 13). They responded that the adjoining page of *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?* contained a “photographic copy of not only the quotation but also the entire page of Brigham Young’s sermon!” (ibid.). Unfortunately, the Tanners have failed to reproduce the page in question in more recent adaptations of their work; see Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *The Changing World of Mormonism*, 2d ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1981), 94. So the issue remains a legitimate one.

⁶ Tanner and Tanner, “Roper Attacks *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?*” 13.

⁷ JD 2:257 (emphasis added).

⁸ Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, 79–92; Lyndon W. Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews: A Restoration Witness* (Orem, UT: Grandin, 1991).

⁹ JD 22:254; 23:101.





disbelief concerning the gold plates from which the Book of Mormon was supposed to be translated and also regarding the angel who showed them the plates. President Young then claimed that a member of the Quorum of the Twelve *also* had an experience in which ‘an angel of God came and laid the plates before him.’ ”¹⁰ Once again, however, the Tanners’ explanation does not accurately represent what Brigham Young said. He did not state that some of the Three or Eight Witnesses doubted that they saw or handled the plates, but only speaks of “some” unidentified witnesses of the Book of Mormon who doubted and disbelieved that they had “seen an angel.” Moreover, the word “also” is not part of Brigham Young’s statement.¹¹ Consequently, the phrase “some of the witnesses” in the first sentence need only include the young member of the Twelve and one other unidentified individual, and not one of the official eleven witnesses, as the Tanners claim. Finally, President Young compares these doubters to unidentified “hundreds of others in a similar condition” of unbelief. Whether intentional or not, by emphasizing only the first sentence of the paragraph, the Tanners do in fact perpetuate a misleading and inaccurate interpretation of Brigham Young’s statement, an interpretation which has little or no historical basis.

The Tanners insist that when Brigham Young speaks of “witnesses” to the Book of Mormon, he can only be referring to the Three or Eight Witnesses.¹² However, that interpretation only makes sense if the use of the term by Brigham Young and his contemporaries is exclusive to the official eleven. While Brigham Young clearly recognized the unique calling of the Three and Eight Witnesses to the Book of Mormon, he and his contemporaries could also use the term *witness* in the context of the Book of Mormon to designate a wider group of individuals. “How many witnesses has the Book of Mormon?” he once asked. “Hundreds and thousands are now living upon the earth, who testify of its truth.”¹³ “Besides the testimony of these

¹⁰ Tanner and Tanner, “Roper Attacks *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?*” 13

¹¹ Ironically, the Tanners accuse me of trying to “redefine Brigham Young’s statement” (ibid.), when, in fact, they have done so by fabricating the nontextual word “also” to defend a dubious interpretation without historical support.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ *JD* 10:326.





twelve witnesses, hundreds and thousands have received a witness to themselves from the heavens, and who can dispute their testimony?"¹⁴ In other words, according to Brigham Young, anyone who can testify that the Book of Mormon is true is, in a very real sense, a Book of Mormon witness. That would include all those testifying from a variety of experiences—those who saw angels, saw or handled the plates, heard the voice of God, had visions, dreams, or those who simply prayed and received the testimony of the Holy Ghost that it is true.¹⁵ So the term *witness* need not be limited to the official eleven. However, the context of Brigham Young's statement alludes to "some," that is, at least two within the group of Book of Mormon witnesses who "handled the plates and conversed with the angels of God." So Brigham Young is speaking of those witnesses who could testify of angels, the plates, or both. Known examples from Church history suggest that there may be many who could fall into that category.

In a revelation given in 1831 the Lord stated, "I have sent forth mine angel flying through the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel, *who hath appeared unto some* and hath committed it unto man, *who shall appear unto many that dwell on the earth*" (D&C 133:36). In 1837 John Taylor referred to the testimony of Joseph Smith regarding the angel and the plates,

¹⁴ *JD* 12:208.

¹⁵ Orson Pratt, in *JD* 16:216–17, speaks in a similar vein: "I will ask the Latter-day Saints—those now sitting before me throughout this large audience, how did you know that Joseph Smith was a Prophet of God when you dwelt in England and had never seen the man? How did you know in Sweden, in Denmark, in Norway, Switzerland, Italy, Australia and in the various parts of the earth from which you emigrated? How did you know that Joseph Smith was a Prophet of God before you crossed the mighty ocean and came to this land? You learned this fact by a knowledge imparted to you by the gift and power of the Holy Ghost in your own native countries. There you have been healed, and have seen the manifestation of the power of God in healing the sick from time to time. There you have had *the vision of your minds opened to behold heavenly things*. There you have *heard the voice of the Almighty* speaking to you by revelation and testifying to you of the things of heaven. *Many* of you have experienced those great and blessed gifts." Orson Pratt described this all-inclusive group as a "vast cloud of witnesses raised up among all nations, and kindreds, and tongues and people to whom this work has been sent, . . . bearing the same testimony—that God has spoken and that the Book of Mormon is true, for the Lord revealed it to them" (emphasis added).





noting that Joseph “was told to choose other three men to whom God would reveal the same things. These three men were together, making prayer to the Lord on the subject, and the angel of the Lord appeared to them, unfolded God’s purposes, showed them the plates, and told them the interpretation was correct. *Since that time angels have appeared to a great number of others, who bear testimony to the same things.*”¹⁶ Early convert Zerah Pulsipher joined the Church shortly after he saw a vision in which angels testified to him that the Book of Mormon was “the great revelation of the last days in which all things spoken of by the prophets must be fulfilled.”¹⁷ Oliver Granger reportedly had a vision in which the angel Moroni appeared to him and testified that the Book of Mormon was true.¹⁸ Another convert, Benjamin Brown, described how after pleading with the Lord for a testimony of the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon, he was visited and severely rebuked by divine messengers who then warned him, “Now you know for yourself! You have seen and heard! If you now fall away, there is no forgiveness for you.”¹⁹

Not only did some individuals receive the witness of heavenly messengers who testified of the Book of Mormon, but others not among the eleven saw both an angel and the plates. Joseph Smith’s mother reported that Lucy Harris described a dream in which she was reproved by an angel for her unbelief. “She [Mrs. Harris] related a very remarkable dream which she said she had during the night. It ran as follows. She said that a personage appeared to her, who told her, that as she had disputed the servant of the Lord, and said his word was not to be believed, and had also asked him many improper questions, she had done that which was not right in the sight of God. After which he said to her, ‘Behold, here are the plates, look upon them and believe.’ After giving us an account of her dream, she described the record

¹⁶ *Latter-day Saint Messenger and Advocate* 3/9 (June 1837): 513 (emphasis added).

¹⁷ Zerah Pulsipher, *History of Zerah Pulsipher*, unpublished manuscript, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, 5.

¹⁸ Augusta J. Crocheron, *Representative Women of Deseret* (Salt Lake City: Graham, 1884), 24.

¹⁹ Benjamin Brown, *Testimonies for the Truth . . .* (Liverpool: Richards, 1853), 5.





very minutely.” Yet after all this she still rejected the Gospel.²⁰ Harrison Burgess, another early convert to the Church, witnessed a similar experience in 1832, although in this instance it was not a dream. He explained that after he retired to the woods, he “commenced praying to the God of heaven for a testimony of these things. Suddenly a glorious personage clothed in white stood before me and exhibited to my view the plates from which the Book of Mormon was taken.”²¹ While the Book of Mormon was being translated at the Whitmer home in Fayette, New York, Mary Musselman Whitmer was shown the plates by a messenger who “turned the leaves of the book of plates over, leaf after leaf, and also showed her the engravings upon them; after which he told her to be faithful in bearing her burden a little longer, promising that if she would do so, she would be blessed and her reward would be sure, if she proved faithful to the end.”²²

In 1846 John D. Lee visited Luke Johnson in St. Joseph, Missouri. Johnson had been one of the original twelve apostles who had left the Church during the Kirtland apostasy of 1837–38. Not insignificantly, Lee described Johnson as “one of the witnesses to the Book of Mormon”²³ even though he was not one of the eleven. According to Lee:

While there I met Luke Johnson, *one of the witnesses to the Book of Mormon*. I had a curiosity to talk with him concerning the same. We took a walk down on the river bank. I asked him if the statement he signed about *seeing the angel and the plates*, was true. If he did see the plates from which the Book of Mormon was printed or translated. He said it was true.

²⁰ Lucy Mack Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet and His Progenitors for Many Generations* (Liverpool: Richards, 1853), 112.

²¹ Harrison Burgess, “Sketch of a Life Well Spent,” LDS Church Archives, 65–66.

²² Andrew Jensen, *The Historical Record* (October 1881): 621, cited in Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, 30–33; for a description by David Whitmer see Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews*, 13, 28, 182, 214, 216–18.

²³ There is virtually no difference between a witness *to* the Book of Mormon and a witness *of* the Book of Mormon. Church leaders could also use the preposition *to* in describing the Three Witnesses; cf. *JD* 7:55; 12:87.





I then said, ‘How is it that you have left the Church? If the angel appeared to you, and you saw the plates, how can you now live out of the Church? I understand you were one of the twelve apostles at the first organization of the Church?’ ‘I was one of the twelve,’ said he, ‘I have not denied the truth of the Book of Mormon. But myself and several others were overtaken in a fault at Kirtland, Ohio. . . . But I have reflected over the matter much since that time, and I have come to the conclusion that each man is accountable for his own sins, also that the course I have been pursuing injures me alone, and I intend to visit the Saints and again ask to be admitted to the Church.’²⁴

Luke Johnson returned to the Church in time to accompany the first Saints west and would later become a bishop in the Church. Consequently, Brigham Young’s statement, “and has continued to contend against this work,” may refer to yet another apostle who left the Church during the Kirtland apostasy. Brigham’s statement may in fact refer to Luke’s brother Lyman Johnson who reportedly apostatized after having seen an angel. “Lyman Johnson had wonderful manifestations given unto him; but when he fell into transgression . . . the power and authority that had distinguished him before was withdrawn.”²⁵ “I remember hearing President Snow say on more than one occasion,” recalled Mathias Cowley, “how determined Lyman E. Johnson was to see an angel from the Lord. He plead [*sic*] with and teased the Lord to send an angel to him until he saw an angel; but President Snow said the trouble with him was that he saw an angel one day and saw the devil the next day, and finally the devil got away with him.”²⁶

Although the Tanners claim that Brigham Young said the Three Witnesses doubted their testimony of the Book of Mormon, available historical evidence does not support that position. Since many early members of the Church claimed powerful spiritual experiences connected with the Book of

²⁴ John D. Lee, *Mormonism Unveiled or the Life and Confessions of the Late Bishop John D. Lee* (St. Louis, Missouri: Bryan, 1877), 184 (emphasis added).

²⁵ *JD* 26:248. A blessing in February 1835 promised “that Holy angels shall administer to him occasionally,” in *HC* 2:188.

²⁶ *Conference Report* (4 October 1901): 18.





Mormon, and since these individuals are also referred to by early Mormons as Book of Mormon “witnesses,” we can justifiably conclude that the phrase “some of the witnesses,” contrary to the Tanners, does indeed refer to some early Mormons who had similar experiences, but not to one of the official Book of Mormon witnesses.

Oliver Cowdery

The Tanners assert that while “none of the witnesses ever gave a written statement repudiating the Book of Mormon, some of them did seem to have seasons of skepticism about the authenticity of that work.”²⁷ In support of this claim they cite a poem, which appeared in the *Times and Seasons* in 1841, written by Joel H. Johnson, which stated that the Book of Mormon was true even if “denied by Oliver.”²⁸ According to the Tanners this poem makes it clear “that the Mormons believed that Oliver Cowdery had denied his testimony of the Book of Mormon.”²⁹ In fact, all the poem suggests is that *Johnson* may have believed that Oliver had denied his testimony to the Book of Mormon. But, even assuming that this is Johnson’s meaning, which is doubtful,³⁰ the statement is without evidential value since

²⁷ Tanner and Tanner, “Roper Attacks *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?*” 13.

²⁸ *Times and Seasons* 2 (1841): 482. The authors have ignored Richard Lloyd Anderson’s discussion of the poem in Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, 152–55.

²⁹ Tanner and Tanner, “Roper Attacks *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?*” 14.

³⁰ “Before claiming that Johnson ‘admitted’ Cowdery’s denial of his testimony, one must assume that ‘denied’ is used in the narrow sense of renouncing, and not in the more general sense of ‘setting aside’ the Book of Mormon in practice, though passively knowing it true. For instance, it is popularly said that Peter ‘denied’ Christ, one of Johnson’s examples. In reality Peter did not deny Christ’s divinity, for that was not in question—but he vehemently declined to be linked with Jesus at the high priest’s house. Peter’s ‘denial’ by disassociating himself from Christ is parallel to Oliver’s disassociation from the Book of Mormon by not actively promoting it for a time. This raises the larger question of whether Johnson as a poet intended to use narrow analytical language anyway, for his overstatement is evident in the cases of Paul killing Christians or the Jewish people killing Christ—neither is strictly true” (Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, 153–54).





Johnson never had an opportunity to witness any denial. Johnson was in Kirtland at the time of Cowdery's excommunication in Missouri and after that had no known contact with this Book of Mormon witness.³¹ While the Tanners and other critics frequently quote the Johnson poem, there is little reason to believe that the line is anything more than a hypothetical statement or one based on unsubstantiated rumor.³²

The Tanners also cite a statement made by G. J. Keen in 1885.³³ Keen reported somewhat ambiguously that when

³¹ Johnson was baptized on 1 June 1831, remaining in Amherst, Ohio, until July 1833, at which time he moved to Kirtland. He remained there until 6 July 1838, but never went to Missouri. Johnson described these events in his autobiography, "Life of Joel H. Johnson: Written by Himself," *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* 29 (1938): 170–71, as follows: "I helped to organize the Kirtland Camp in 1838 and travelled with it as far as Springfield, Illinois; was called by council to stop there and take care of the sick. I commenced preaching and soon gathered a branch of the Church of forty members over which I presided until January 8, 1839, when the Lord showed me by revelation that I must immediately go to Carthage in Hancock county"; . Johnson remained in Hancock County until the end of May 1846 when mobs forced him and his family to move to Knox County, Illinois. On 6 May 1848 Johnson left for Winter Quarters and on 5 July he departed with the Willard Richards company for Salt Lake, arriving there on 9 October 1848 (*ibid.*). See also his 6 February 1840 letter in *Times and Seasons* (1 March 1841): 76–77.

³² "After the objector takes one arbitrary meaning of 'denied,' he is left with Johnson quoting an unidentified number of middlemen, supposedly quoting Cowdery. It does not matter historically if an irresponsible rumor can be proved to be contemporary—it is still rumor without direct evidence to support it," in Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, 154.

³³ Affidavit of G. J. Keen, 14 April 1885, in Charles A. Shook, *The True Origin of the Book of Mormon* (Cincinnati, OH: Standard, 1914), 58–59. Close associates of Cowdery during this time speak of his reluctance even to discuss Mormonism at all. When Thomas Gregg asked W. Lang if Cowdery had ever "openly denounced Mormonism," Lang responded, "No man ever knew better than he how to keep one's own counsel. He would never allow any man to drag him into a conversation on the subject" (William Lang to Thomas Gregg, 5 November 1881, Tiffin, Ohio, in Shook, *The True Origin of the Book of Mormon*, 56). "I think that it is absolutely certain," wrote W. H. Gibson, "that Mr. C., after his separation from the Mormons, never conversed on the subject with his most intimate friends, and never by word or act, disclosed anything relating to the conception, development or progress of the 'Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.'" (W. H. Gibson to Thomas Gregg, 3 August 1882, Tiffin, Ohio,





Cowdery was accepted as a member of the Protestant Methodist Church at Tiffin, Ohio, in the 1840s, “he arose and addressed the audience present, admitted his error and implored forgiveness, and said he was sorry and ashamed of his connection with Mormonism.”³⁴ The Tanners naively conclude from this that Oliver must have been ashamed of his testimony of the Book of Mormon, but since the purported statement says nothing about the Book of Mormon, the plates, or the angel, one cannot infer such a denial, since each of the witnesses continued to reaffirm his testimony of the Book of Mormon, while at times opposing other Church teachings, such as polygamy, which they believed to be in error. For instance, Thomas B. Marsh, who also turned against Joseph Smith, interviewed Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer shortly after their excommunication and at the height of their bitterness against Joseph Smith. Although at that time they considered Joseph to be a fallen prophet, both witnesses still reaffirmed their testimony of the angel.³⁵

in Shook, *The True Origin of the Book of Mormon*, 57). So when Keen states that in 1840 he learned of Cowdery’s “full and final renunciation” of Mormonism (Shook, *The True Origin of the Book of Mormon*, 59), he can only be referring to Oliver’s official resignation from the Church in April 1838, at which time he indicated that while he strongly disagreed with Joseph Smith and other Church leaders and was in conflict with certain principles relating to “the outward government of this Church,” he did not disbelieve basic doctrines; cf. Donald Q. Cannon and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *Far West Record* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983), 165–66.

³⁴ Shook, *The True Origin of the Book of Mormon*, 58–59.

³⁵ “I enquired seriously at David if it was true that he had seen the angel, according to the testimony as one of the witnesses of the Book of Mormon. He replied, as sure as there is a God in heaven, he saw the angel, according to his testimony in that book. I asked him, if so, how did he not stand by Joseph? He answered, in the days when Joseph received the Book of Mormon, and brought it forth, he was a good man filled with the Holy Ghost, but he considered he had now fallen. I interrogated Oliver Cowdery in the same manner, who answered me similarly,” in “History of Thomas Baldwin Marsh,” *Deseret News*, 24 March 1858. For additional evidence of Oliver Cowdery’s adherence to his testimony of the Book of Mormon during his absence from the Church, see Richard Lloyd Anderson’s discussion of his courtroom testimony in *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, 57–60; *JD* 22:254). Brigham Young also described another apparently distinct affirmation which occurred at Cowdery’s law office (*JD* 7:55). Brigham could have learned of these accounts from close relatives, such as Phineas Young, who kept in close contact with Oliver during his absence from the Church and who were present at his return in 1848 (*ibid.*;





Fortunately, for the historian of the Book of Mormon witnesses, we have contemporary letters written by Cowdery during his years in Ohio and Wisconsin that provide valuable information on Cowdery's attitudes about his former Church and friends.³⁶ As primary sources written by Cowdery himself, they are far more useful than the ambiguous and late recollection of Keen. In these letters Cowdery frequently alludes to the persecution he often received for having formerly been connected with Mormonism³⁷ and also expresses regret over the unfortunate events which led to his estrangement from the Church.³⁸ These letters also portray a man anxious to clear his name from what he felt were unjustified attacks upon his character,³⁹ a matter which he felt was designed by his enemies to undermine the weight of

Seymour B. Young, *Conference Reports* [April 1921], 115–16). For information on Oliver's testimony of Priesthood restoration and his attitudes toward the Church from 1848 until his death in 1850, see Richard Lloyd Anderson, "The Second Witness of Priesthood Restoration," *Improvement Era* 71/9 (September 1968): 15–24; Anderson, "The Second Witness on Priesthood Succession," *Improvement Era* 71 (November 1968): 14–20.

³⁶ Many of these have been made available in Stanley R. Gunn, *Oliver Cowdery: Second Elder and Scribe* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1962). While Gunn's collection is not comprehensive, he was among the first historians to make these letters generally available and provides a useful commentary, even though it is now somewhat dated.

³⁷ "My business is steadily increasing—nothing operates against me, except the fact that I have been formerly connected with, what is now an important Church. Were it not for this I believe I could rise to the heights of my ambition. But shame on man, or men, who are so beneath themselves as to make this a business. My God has sustained me, and is able to sustain me, and through his own mysterious providence, lift me above all my foes," Oliver Cowdery to Phineas Young, 19 August 1842, Tiffin, Ohio, in Gunn, *Oliver Cowdery*, 245. "I do not have that society [of close friends and relations] here. I am a mark for my enemies and only stand in the strength of my God. They fear my talent and God has put the fear of my countenance upon their hearts. They have tried to overcome me, but God the Lord has raised me up," Oliver Cowdery to Phineas Young, 26 August 1843, Tiffin, Ohio, in Gunn, *Oliver Cowdery*, 246. See also Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, 37–48.

³⁸ Oliver Cowdery to Brigham Young et al., 25 December 1842, Tiffin, Ohio, in Gunn, *Oliver Cowdery*, 161–62.

³⁹ Oliver Cowdery to Phineas Young, 18 December 1845, Tiffin, Ohio, in Gunn, *Oliver Cowdery*, 248–49; Oliver Cowdery to Phineas Young, 26 March 1846, Tiffin, Ohio, in Gunn, *Oliver Cowdery*, 250–51.





his testimony.⁴⁰ In a letter to Phineas Young in 1846 from Tiffin, Ohio, he explained some of the reasons for this sensitivity.

And that I may not be misunderstood, let me here say, that I have only sought, and only asked, that my character might be exonerated from those charges imputed to me, the crimes of theft, forgery etc. Those which all my former associates knew to be false. I do not, I have never asked, to be excused, or exempted from an acknowledgement of any actual fault or wrong—for of these there are many, which it always was my pleasure to confess—I *have cherished a hope, and that one of my fondest, that I might leave such a character as those who might believe in my testimony, after I should be called hence, might do so, not only for the sake of truth, but might not blush for the private character of the man who bore that testimony.* I have been sensitive on this subject, I admit, but I ought to so be, you would be under the circumstances, had you stood in the presence of John with our departed Brother Joseph, to receive the Lesser Priesthood, and in the presence of Peter, to receive the Greater, and looked down through time, and witness the effects that these two must produce—you would feel what you have never felt, were wicked men conspiring to lessen the effects of your testimony on man, after you should have gone to your long sought rest.⁴¹

Such statements made by Cowdery during the Tiffin period, while he was still a nonmember, show that, while outside of the Church, he continued to maintain the reality of certain restoration events in which he was both a witness and a participant.

Martin Harris

There is no evidence for the Tanners' claim that Martin Harris ever denied or doubted his testimony of the Book of

⁴⁰ Oliver Cowdery to Phineas Young, 23 March 1846, in Gunn, *Oliver Cowdery*, 250–51.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* (emphasis added).





Mormon. However, since he affiliated with several Mormon splinter groups between 1838 and 1870, the Tanners claim that he was “unstable and easily influenced by charismatic leaders.”⁴² But that statement does not hold true of Harris’s testimony of the Book of Mormon, which for years remained the mainstay of his life.⁴³ As one historian correctly notes, with each of these splinter groups “[Harris] desired to preach to them more than to listen to them. While separated from the body of the Church, he responded in friendship to those who sought his support and fussed over him. But in each case Harris wanted to preach Book of Mormon, which usually led to a dividing of the ways.”⁴⁴ Martin was excommunicated in December 1837 in Kirtland, Ohio, where he remained for the next thirty-two years. During this time, Harris associated himself with Warren Parrish and other Kirtland dissenters who organized a church. On March 30, 1839, George A. Smith wrote a letter from Kirtland describing some of the divisions in the Parrish party. “Last Sabbath a division arose among the Parrish party about the Book of Mormon; John F. Boynton, Warren Parrish, Luke Johnson and others said it was nonsense. Martin Harris then bore testimony of its truth and said all would be damned if they rejected it.”⁴⁵ Such actions suggest a significant degree of independence for which Harris is generally not given credit.

After the Saints left Kirtland, Harris lost contact with the main body of the Church and was not in harmony with some Church doctrines during this time. However, a rebaptism in 1842 suggests that he still sympathized with Mormon teachings. Although in 1846 Martin briefly affiliated with the Strangites and was sent by them on a mission to England, available sources from this period indicate that he was never fully committed to the

⁴² Tanner and Tanner, “Roper Attacks *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?*” 14. This religious instability has been greatly exaggerated by the Tanners and others. For a clearer perspective see Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, 167–70.

⁴³ Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, 111–12.

⁴⁴ Rhett S. James, *The Man Who Knew: The Early Years: A Play about Martin Harris 1824–1830* (Cache Valley, UT: Martin Harris Pageant Committee, 1983, 168 n. 313; James’s annotations provide a valuable historical commentary on Harris’s life.

⁴⁵ George A. Smith to Josiah Fleming, 30 March 1838, Kirtland, Ohio.





Strangite cause.⁴⁶ His main motivation in going seems to have been to testify of the Book of Mormon. On one occasion Martin attempted to address a conference of Latter-day Saints in Birmingham, but was forbidden from doing so, and then was curtly asked to leave the meeting. Bitter and obviously embarrassed by the rebuff, Harris then reportedly went out into the street and began to rail against Church leaders.⁴⁷ However, George Mantle, who witnessed the event, later recalled:

When we came out of the meeting Martin Harris was beset with a crowd in the street, expecting he would furnish them with material to war against Mormonism; but when asked if Joseph Smith was a true prophet of God, he answered yes; and when asked if the Book of Mormon was true, this was his answer: "Do you know that is the sun shining on us? Because as sure as you know that, I know that Joseph Smith was a true prophet of God, and that he translated that book by the power of God."⁴⁸

Harris sympathized for a time with other dissenters such as William McLellin and Gladden Bishop, but these men still ac-

⁴⁶ Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, 112–13. Obviously distrustful of Harris's apostate status, Latter-day Saint leaders in England complained that Martin Harris, "ashamed of his profession as a Strangite . . . tells some of our brethren on whom he called, that he was of the *same profession with themselves*—that he had just come from America and wished to get acquainted with the Saints"; *Millennial Star* 8 (3 October 1846): 128 (emphasis added). Harris's lack of enthusiasm for Strang and his Latter-day Saint sympathies so troubled Strangite leaders that they soon brought him back to Philadelphia, where he abandoned them for good; Lester Brooks to James M. Adams, 12 January 1847, in Milo M. Quaipe, *The Kingdom of Saint James: A Narrative of the Mormons* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1930), 243. Martin emphatically denied that during the journey, he had ever lectured against Mormonism: "No man heard me in any way deny the truth of the Book of Mormon, the administration of the angel that showed me the plates; nor the organization of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints under the administration of Joseph Smith, Jr."; *Journal History*, 1 June 1877, as cited in Madge Harris Tuckett and Belle Harris Wilson, *The Martin Harris Story* (Provo: Vintage Books, 1983), 65.

⁴⁷ *Millennial Star* 8 (31 October 1846): 128.

⁴⁸ George Mantle to Marietta Walker, 26 December 1888, Saint Catherine, Missouri, cited in *Autumn Leaves* 2 (1889): 141.





cepted the Book of Mormon. As Anderson rightly notes, “Every affiliation of Martin Harris was with some Mormon group, except when he accepted some Shaker beliefs, a position not basically contrary to his testimony of the Book of Mormon because the foundation of that movement was acceptance of personal revelation from heavenly beings.”⁴⁹

The Tanners attempt to downplay the significance of the witnesses’ written testimony by noting similarities between it and several nineteenth-century Shaker writings in which some Shaker believers claimed to have seen angels and visions. “Joseph Smith only had three witnesses who claimed to see an angel. The Shakers, however, had a large number of witnesses who claimed they saw angels and the book. [In Shaker writings,] there are over a hundred pages of testimony from ‘Living Witnesses.’”⁵⁰ But the quantity of witnesses has little meaning if those witnesses afterwards admit that they were wrong. Unlike the Book of Mormon, the Shaker *Roll and Book* afterwards fell into discredit and dishonor among the Shakers themselves and was abandoned by its leaders and most believers,⁵¹ while the Book of

⁴⁹ Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, 111. Harris’s involvement with the Shakers has already been discussed by Richard Anderson, 164–66, yet the Tanners have ignored his discussion of the matter. Is this, to paraphrase the Tanners (p. 13), an indication of the “superficiality” of their review?

⁵⁰ Tanner and Tanner, “Roper Attacks *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?*” 14.

⁵¹ One nineteenth-century authority on the Shakers relates, “Some of the most curious literature of the Shakers dates from this period [early-to-midnineteenth century]; and it is freely admitted by their leading men that they were in some cases misled into acts and publications which they have since seen reason to regret. Their belief is that they were deceived by false spirits, and were unable, in many cases, to distinguish the true from the false. That is to say, they hold to their faith in ‘spiritual communications,’ so called; but repudiate much in which they formerly had faith, believing this which they now reject to have come from the evil one. . . . The most curious relics of those days are two considerable volumes, which have since fallen into discredit among the Shakers themselves, but were at the time of their issue regarded as highly important. One of these is entitled ‘*A Holy, Sacred, and Divine Roll and Book, from the Lord God of Heaven to the Inhabitants of the Earth.*’ . . . The second work is called ‘*The Divine Book of Holy and Eternal Wisdom, revealing the Word of God, out of whose mouth goeth a sharp Sword.*’ . . . These two volumes are not now, as formerly, held in honor by the Shakers. One of their elders declared to me that I ought never to have seen them, and that their best use was to burn





Mormon continued to be a vitally important part of Mormon scripture to which each of the witnesses, including Martin Harris, continued to testify, even while outside of the Church.

On page 14 of their recent newsletter, the Tanners assert that “Martin Harris’ involvement with the Shakers raises some serious doubts regarding his belief in the Book of Mormon. We feel that a believer in the Book of Mormon could not accept these revelations without repudiating the teachings of Joseph Smith.”⁵² But such a conclusion is absurd, since the witnesses obviously did at times reject some of Joseph Smith’s teachings, while still maintaining that the Book of Mormon was true and that their experience was real. However, the Tanners’ conclusion is unjustified for another reason: Martin Harris never accepted all Shaker beliefs. For instance, while devoted Shakers advocated celibacy, Martin remained married during this period and had several children.⁵³ Further, Harris never joined nearby communities of Shakers as the fully committed would have done. Shakers believed in spiritual gifts and emphasized preparation for Christ’s Second Coming, things that Harris had believed even before he joined the Church. Even an early revelation to the Prophet Joseph Smith suggested that the Shakers had some truths (D&C 49:1–28). Harris was likely enthusiastic about certain elements of Shakerism that paralleled his own beliefs in a restoration, but he rejected other Shaker beliefs and practices, which his actions during these years clearly show. Thus, Harris’s brief interest in the Shaker *Roll and Book* is quite understandable and consistent.⁵⁴ “Since it claimed to come from angels to prepare the world for the Millennium, it would be broadly harmonious with Martin Harris’ commitment to the Book of Mormon, which in a far more historical and rational

them,” in Charles Nordhoff, *The Communistic Societies of the United States* (New York: Hillary House Publishers, 1961), 235, 245, 248, 250; this is a reprint of the 1875 edition.

⁵² Tanner and Tanner, “Roper Attacks Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?” 14.

⁵³ Wayne C. Gunnell, “Martin Harris: Witness and Benefactor to the Book of Mormon,” Master’s thesis, Brigham Young University, 1955, 58–59.

⁵⁴ For a discussion of Martin Harris’s attitudes regarding the Shaker *Book* in relation to his testimony of the Book of Mormon, see Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, 164–66.





sense is committed to the same goal.”⁵⁵ But although Harris’s interest in Shakerism was short-lived, evidence from the same period shows that he never wavered from his testimony of the Book of Mormon.⁵⁶

David Whitmer

While the Tanners have no evidence that David Whitmer ever doubted or denied his testimony of the Book of Mormon, they claim that his testimony cannot be relied upon because he later claimed to have had other revelations criticizing the Mormons. The Tanners note that David briefly followed the pretensions of William McLellin and once gave several revelations which “strongly condemned Mormonism.”⁵⁷ They also claim that there is no evidence that he ever repudiated these revelations.⁵⁸ In fact, soon after this, the Whitmers and Hiram Page admitted that these activities were improper and “not in accordance with the order of the gospel church.”⁵⁹ And later, David Whitmer alluded to these actions and revelations as “errors in doctrine, which the Lord has since shown me, and which errors I have confessed and repented of.”⁶⁰ The Tanners also cite a statement made by David Whitmer two years before his death in 1887: “If you believe my testimony to the Book of Mormon; if you believe that God spake to us three witnesses by his own voice, then I tell you that in June 1838, God spake to me again by his own voice from the heavens, and told me to ‘separate myself from among the Latter-day Saints, for as they sought to do unto me, so it should be done unto them.’ ”⁶¹ According to the

⁵⁵ Ibid., 165–66.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 165.

⁵⁷ Tanner and Tanner, “Roper Attacks *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?*” 14.

⁵⁸ Tanner, *Major Problems of Mormonism*, 146.

⁵⁹ Hiram Page to Alfred Bonny and others, 24 June 1849, *Olive Branch* (August 1849): 28.

⁶⁰ David Whitmer, *An Address to All Believers in Christ* (Richmond, MO: n.p., 1887), 27.

⁶¹ Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, 165: “What kind of a ‘voice’ did David hear? . . . David does not really say; he only implies that it was audible by comparing it with the command to testify of the Book of Mormon. But there are problems with that because David Whitmer did not treat the two experiences equally in his long life-





Tanners, “Mormons cannot accept this testimony by their own witness without destroying faith in Joseph Smith.”⁶² Actually, the voice David described said nothing about Joseph Smith, his revelations, or the truthfulness of the Church, although by 1887 David had obviously drawn his own conclusions from the experience.⁶³ The Tanners incorrectly state that this voice told David Whitmer “that he should leave the Mormon Church,”⁶⁴ since by this time David had already been excommunicated and

time. He only mentioned the undefined voice at Far West once, in this last writing to fellow believers—but he had repeatedly testified of an audible voice authenticating the Book of Mormon. Those with him in 1830 in the New York grove certified that they had also heard God’s voice then, but neither Oliver Cowdery nor John Whitmer, both of whom left Far West with David at this time, say anything about the heavenly command in 1838. Whatever came to David Whitmer, the latter experience fails to contradict his earlier divine command to testify of the ancient record. David Whitmer could have received true spiritual comfort because of the unjust methods that his former associates were using against him; or he may have only felt that God spoke to him because of the powerful indignation that swelled up in his soul; or if he gave way to the spirit of anger and retaliation, he invited Satan to inspire him and deceive him,” in Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, 164.

⁶² Tanner and Tanner, “Roper Attacks *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?*” 14. David Whitmer would have found such reasoning absurd: “Some people think if they can only make it appear that Joseph’s life and character were not perfect, and that he had human weaknesses, that it would prove that he was not a prophet; yet the same persons will believe that Moses who killed the Egyptian, and David, who had Uriah killed, and who took a multitude of wives, and Solomon who was a polygamist and idolator; and Peter, who lied and cursed, &c., were all prophets and should be honored and respected. *What the individual life of Joseph Smith was after he translated the Book of Mormon, has nothing to do with the question as to whether he was, or was not inspired to bring that book forth.*” David Whitmer, interview by William H. Kelly and G. A. Blakeslee, 15 January 1882, Richmond, Missouri, *The Saints’ Herald* 29 (1 March 1882), in Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews*, 852 (emphasis added).

⁶³ When David Whitmer states, “In the Spring of 1838, the heads of the Church and many of the members had gone deep into error and blindness” (ibid.), he is clearly expressing his own opinions and not the content of any purported revelation.

⁶⁴ Tanner and Tanner, “Roper Attacks *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?*” 14.





was no longer a member.⁶⁵ David simply reports that he was told to “separate” himself from the Latter-day Saint community at Far West, which was probably a good idea under the circumstances.⁶⁶ Yet, significantly, for nearly fifty-one years after that separation, he continued to maintain that his testimony of the Book of Mormon was true.

B. H. Roberts: A Doubting Witness of the Book of Mormon?

During a recent Salt Lake City radio program, Jerald Tanner suggested that I had misrepresented a statement by B. H. Roberts in which the former Church leader explained the purpose of his unpublished presentation of Book of Mormon criticisms.⁶⁷ After checking the citation in my review with the source in question, I realized that I had inadvertently cited a secondary source, when I should have cited the letter itself, a copy of which was readily available.⁶⁸ While I regret the mistake, the citation,

⁶⁵ David Whitmer was excommunicated from the Church on 13 April 1838; Cannon and Cook, *Far West Record*, 176–78.

⁶⁶ Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, 163–64: “These circumstances are well known to Mormon historians; after the excommunications of Oliver Cowdery and David and John Whitmer, Sidney Rigdon had preached his ‘Salt Sermon,’ warning dissenters not to interfere with Mormon society. The Whitmers and Cowdery were next told to get out of town, and with turmoil caused by forcible rejection, they left the Mormon center of Far West. Joseph Smith later criticized Sidney Rigdon’s aggressive speeches and also the secret teachings of Sampson Avard, probably the chief mover in this expulsion.” For an historical perspective on Sampson Avard, the Mormons, and the Danites, see Leland Gentry, “The Danite Band of 1838,” *BYU Studies* 14/4 (Summer 1974): 421–50; Rebecca Foster Cornwall and Leonard J. Arrington, “Perpetration of a Myth: Mormon Danites in Five Western Novels, 1840–90,” *BYU Studies* 23/2 (Spring 1983): 147–65; Richard L. Anderson, “Atchison’s Letters and the Causes of Mormon Expulsion from Missouri,” *BYU Studies* 26/3 (Summer 1986): 3–47; David Whittaker, “The Book of Daniel in Early Mormon Thought,” in *By Study and Also by Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh Nibley*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1990), 1:166–74.

⁶⁷ Roper, review of *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?* 193.

⁶⁸ The secondary source from which I took the citation was Truman Madsen and John Welch, “Did B. H. Roberts Lose Faith in the Book of Mormon?” F.A.R.M.S. paper, 1985, part 2, page 3. Through a careless editorial mistake on my part, I neglected to place an “Ibid.” at the beginning of





even as it stands in the review, accurately demonstrates Roberts's position on his unpublished study. Lest there be any question on this matter, however, I now cite Roberts's letter in its entirety. Italics indicate those words cited in the review.

President Heber J. Grant and Council
and Quorum of Twelve Apostles
Salt Lake City, Utah
Salt Lake City, Utah, March, 15th 1923 [1922]

Dear Brethren:

You will perhaps remember that during the hearing on "Problems of the Book of Mormon" reported to your Council January, 1922, I stated in my remarks that there were other problems which I thought should be considered in addition to those submitted in my report. Brother Richard R. Lyman asked if they would help solve the problems already presented, or if they would increase our difficulties. My answer was that they would very greatly increase our difficulties, on which he replied, "Then I do not know why we should consider them." My answer was, however, that it was my intention to go on with the consideration to the last analysis. Accordingly, since the matter was already so far under my hand, I continued my studies, and submit herewith the record of them. *I do not say my conclusions, for they are undrawn.*

footnote 79 on page 193 of the review. My original purpose in citing the reference to the published version of Roberts's study (Brigham Madsen, ed., *B. H. Roberts: Studies of the Book of Mormon* [Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985], 57–58) was to draw attention to the fact that the Tanners, although familiar with Roberts's statement, were "completely silent about Roberts's own explanation of the study's purpose, when in fact it sheds an entirely different light on the state of his faith and testimony" (Roper, review of Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?*, 193, n. 79). That point is still a legitimate one, since they have advertised the book for sale through their ministry and bookstore for a number of years. Welch inadvertently inserted two of Roberts's sentences, one from the first paragraph and another from the fourth into the middle of the second paragraph of Roberts's letter. The word "this" has also been replaced by the word "the" in line 6 of paragraph 2 and the word "very" has also been deleted from line 7 of paragraph 4. A xerox copy of Roberts's original letter, however, can be found in the same article as Exhibit 6. I would like to thank Jerald Tanner for bringing this mistake to my attention.





In writing out this my report to you of those studies, I have written it from the viewpoint of an open mind, investigating the facts of the Book of Mormon origin and authorship. *Let me say once for all, so as to avoid what might otherwise call for repeated explanation, that what is herein set forth does not represent any conclusions of mine. This report herewith submitted is what it purports to be, namely a "study of Book of Mormon origins," for the information of those who ought to know everything about it pro et con, as well as that which has been produced against it, and that which may be produced against it. I am taking the position that our faith is not only unshaken but unshakable in the Book of Mormon, and therefore we can look without fear upon all that can be said against it.*

While searching for the answers to the questions of Mr. Couch, submitted through Mr. William E. Riter, I came in contact with the material here used, and concluded that while the subject was fresh in my mind to make it of record for those who should be its students and know on what ground the Book of Mormon may be questioned, as well as that which supports its authenticity and its truth.

If it is impossible for the General Authorities to consider this whole matter together, then, I submit that it might be referred to the committee you appointed to consider with me the answers to be given Mr. Couch, namely, Elders Ivins, Talmadge [*sic*], and Widtsoe, with a request that they report on the same. I am very sure that you will find the material herewith submitted of intense interest, and *it may be of very great importance since it represents what may be used by some opponent in criticism of the Book of Mormon.*

It is not necessary for me to suggest that maintenance of the truth of the Book of Mormon is absolutely essential to the integrity of the whole Mormon movement, for it is inconceivable that the Book of Mormon should be untrue in its origin or character and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints be a true Church.

All which is respectfully submitted





Very truly your brother⁶⁹

Although the Tanners are familiar with this statement, they have until now remained strangely silent about it. While Roberts's studies have been available in published form since 1985,⁷⁰ the Tanners failed to mention Roberts's statement in their 1987 revision of *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?*⁷¹ In their 1989 work *Major Problems of Mormonism*⁷² they are also strangely silent concerning the statement. Even their most recent discussion of B. H. Roberts's studies⁷³ says nothing about the cover letter which Roberts always intended should accompany the manuscript.⁷⁴ Their continuing silence regarding evidence for Roberts's continuing belief in the Book of Mormon is inexcusable.

⁶⁹ B. H. Roberts to Heber J. Grant and the Council of Twelve Apostles, 15 March 1923, Salt Lake City, Utah (emphasis added). A photocopy of the document is reproduced in Exhibit 6 of Welch and Madsen, "Did B. H. Roberts Lose Faith in the Book of Mormon." The year date on the letter is incorrect and should date 1922, not 1923. See Brigham Madsen, *B. H. Roberts: Studies of the Book of Mormon*, 33, n. 65, 57–58.

⁷⁰ Madsen, *B. H. Roberts: Studies of the Book of Mormon*, 57–58. This work was first made available through the Tanners' bookstore in October 1986 and was advertised in their newsletter.

⁷¹ Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?* 5th ed. (Salt Lake City: Utah Lighthouse Ministry, 1987), 82–84.

⁷² Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Major Problems of Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: Utah Lighthouse Ministry, 1989), 156–60.

⁷³ Jerald and Sandra Tanner, "B. H. Roberts' Doubts," *Salt Lake City Messenger* 84 (April 1993): 10–11.

⁷⁴ B. H. Roberts to Richard R. Lyman, 24 October 1927, cited in Madsen, *B. H. Roberts: Studies of the Book of Mormon*, 58–60. Roberts felt that the Ethan Smith, *View of the Hebrews*, theory might "in the hands of a skillful opponent" be used at some future time in an attempt to embarrass the Church. It was in order to prepare future believers to defend against such attacks, and not because he doubted the truth of the Book of Mormon, that he had pursued the study. "Such a question as that may possibly arise some day, and if it does, it would be greatly to the advantage of our future Defenders of the Faith, if they had in hand a thorough digest of the subject matter," in *ibid*, 59–60. If the statements in Roberts's presentation truly represented his own conclusions about the Book of Mormon as the Tanners claim, it is highly unlikely that his brethren in the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve, to whom it was written, would have retained him in a position of Church leadership for the next decade.



**“Tannerism”: Shadow or Reality?**

Last year, I also cited several examples from chapter five of *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?* where the Tanners had misrepresented statements by Richard L. Anderson.⁷⁵ Since it was obvious that Anderson’s statements did not support and in fact undermined the very arguments the Tanners were trying to make, I seriously wondered why they had bothered to quote him at all. The Tanners retorted, “If [Roper] had carefully read all of Chapter 5 of our book, he would not have fallen into this serious error.”⁷⁶ After reading the Tanners’ response I went back and reread that chapter. I am grateful to the Tanners for that invitation, which has now confirmed my first evaluation. Below are several additional examples from their writings, some of which I apparently missed before.

Book of Mormon Witnesses

Tanners’ Partial Quotation *Full Quotation by Anderson*

| | |
|---|--|
| <p>The cessation of his activity in the Church meant a suspension of his role as a witness of the Book of Mormon. Not that his conviction ceased, but he discontinued public testimony . . . he logically affiliated himself with a Christian congregation for a time, the Methodist Protestant church at</p> | <p>The cessation of his activity in the Church meant a suspension of his role as a witness of the Book of Mormon. Not that his conviction ceased, but he discontinued public testimony as he worked out a successful legal and political career in non-Mormon society and avoided its prejudiced antagonism by</p> |
|---|--|

⁷⁵ Roper, review of *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?* 172–76. The fact that writers such as the Tanners make inadvertent mistakes is not particularly significant, unless those citations alter, distort, or suppress information that may weaken their arguments. What I find disturbing about the Tanners’ writings is not the fact that there are mistakes, but that those examples often delete or hide information which is relevant to the very issues at stake.

⁷⁶ Tanner and Tanner, “Roper Attacks *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?* 14.





Ohio. (Tanner, "Roper Attacks *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?*", 13)

creating as little conflict as possible. Since faith in Jesus Christ was the foundation of his religion, he logically affiliated himself with a Christian congregation for a time, the Methodist Protestant Church at Tiffin, Ohio. There is no more inconsistency in this than Paul's worshipping in the Jewish synagogue, or Joseph Smith's becoming a Mason in order to stem prejudice. (Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, 57)

Tanners' Partial Quotation

*Full Quotation
by Widtsoe*

H i r a m P a g e
(1800–1852), appears to have been somewhat fanatical. He found a stone through which he claimed to receive revelations, often contrary to those received by Joseph Smith. For this he was reprimanded. (Tanner and Tanner, *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?* 52)

H i r a m P a g e
(1800–1852), appears to have been somewhat fanatical. He found a stone through which he claimed to receive revelations, often contrary to those received by Joseph Smith. For this he was reprimanded. At last he withdrew from the Church, but, as with the others, courageously and sturdily maintained that he had seen the plates, and that Joseph Smith was a Prophet of God. (John A. Widtsoe, *Joseph Smith: Seeker After Truth*, 58)



**Nineteenth-Century Parallels***Tanners' Partial Quotation*

The Book of Mormon can and should be tested. It invites criticism, . . . (Tanner and Tanner, *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?* 63)

Full Quotation by Nibley

The Book of Mormon can and should be tested. It invites criticism, and the best possible test for its authenticity is provided by its own oft-proclaimed provenance in the Old World. Since the Nephites are really a branch broken off from the main cultural, racial, and religious stock, that provenance can be readily examined. (Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 16)

Tanners' Partial Quotation

A forgery is defined by specialists in ancient documents as "any document which was not produced in the time, place, and manner claimed by it or its publishers" (Tanner and Tanner, *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?* 74).

Full Quotation by Nibley

A forgery is defined by specialists in ancient documents as "any document which was not produced in the time, place and manner claimed by it or its publisher." The Book of Mormon obligingly gives full information regarding the time, place and manner of its production. . . . The authenticity of an ancient writing can be judged only in terms of what it claims for itself, never of what others claim for it. Otherwise one might begin by assuming that the Book of Mormon was





written by an Eskimo hunter, a Portuguese fisherman, or a New York farmer, and from there proceed to seek out anything and everything in its pages that might confirm the theory. That won't do, because literary evidence can always be contrived, by an ingenious and dedicated interpreter. [The author then goes on to say that most Book of Mormon critics have "expended their powers in examining not what the Book of Mormon claims for itself, but only what others have claimed for it" (Nibley, *Since Cumorah*, 142–43).]

Tanners' Partial Quotation

The Mormon people have no objection to scholars finding parallels to Shakespeare (i.e., in Book of Mormon passages). (Tanner and Tanner, *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?* 84)

Full Quotation by Sperry

The Mormon people have no objections to scholars finding parallels to Shakespeare in a passage of the Book of Mormon *if such parallels are fairly used* (Sidney Sperry, *Problems of the Book of Mormon*, 124–27, emphasis added). [The Tanners then omit a discussion showing that similar language can be found in other ancient sources suggesting that the ideas in question were not original to Shakespeare.]

Creative Ability?

The Tanners have asserted that Joseph Smith was very familiar with nineteenth-century works that speculated on the Hebrew origins of native Americans. Recently they have stated, "We are convinced that Joseph Smith read a number of books





and articles about the Indians—especially books equating them with the Israelites.”⁷⁷ And what is the evidence for that? “*His own mother*, Lucy Smith, tells that Joseph had a fervent interest in the ancient Indians *before* he received the plates from which he ‘translated’ the Book of Mormon.”⁷⁸ They then cite a statement from Lucy Mack Smith as follows:

During our evening conversations, Joseph would occasionally give us some of the most amusing recitals that could be imagined. He would describe the ancient inhabitants of this continent, their dress, mode of travelling, and the animals upon which they rode; their cities, their buildings, with every particular; their mode of warfare; and also their religious worship. This he would do with as much ease, seemingly, *as if he had spent his whole life with them.*⁷⁹

In other words the Prophet’s mother is the evidence for Joseph’s creativity! However, the Tanners have again misrepresented the statement in question for the Prophet’s mother did not claim that Joseph obtained this information on his own or from books, but rather that this was after “*he continued to receive instructions from the Lord*, and we continued to get the children together every evening for the purpose of listening while he gave us a relation of the same. . . . [Joseph] had never read the Bible through in his life: *he seemed much less inclined to the perusal of books than any of the rest of our children*, but far more given to meditation and deep study.”⁸⁰ The citation doesn’t at all support what the Tanners claim it does.

Another example of this same problem can be seen in the Tanners’ attempt to show that Joseph Smith possessed the creative ability to make up interesting new names such as are found in the Book of Mormon. To support this assertion they quote the following statement:

⁷⁷ Jerald and Sandra Tanner, “The Book of Mormon: Ancient or Modern,” *Salt Lake City Messenger* 84 (April 1993): 7.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ As cited by the Tanners, “The Book of Mormon: Ancient or Modern?” 7, from Lucy Mack Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet and His Progenitors for Many Generations* (Liverpool: Richards, 1853), 85.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 84–85.



*Tanners' Partial Quotation**Full Quotation*

While residing at Kirtland, Elder Reynolds Cahoon had a son born to him. One day when President Joseph Smith was passing his door he called the Prophet in and asked him to bless and name the baby. Joseph did so and gave the boy the name of Mahonri Moriancumer. (Tanner and Tanner, *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?* 95)□

While residing at Kirtland, Elder Reynolds Cahoon had a son born to him. One day when President Joseph Smith was passing his door he called the Prophet in and asked him to bless and name the baby. Joseph did so and gave the boy the name of Mahonri Moriancumer. When he had finished the blessing, he laid the child on the bed, and turning to Elder Cahoon he said, the name I have given your son is the name of the Brother of Jared; the Lord has just shown or revealed it to me. Elder William F. Cahoon, who was standing near heard the Prophet make this statement to his father; and this was the first time the name of the brother of Jared was known in the Church in this dispensation. (The *Juvenile Instructor* 27/8 [15 April 1892]: 282)

The full quotation explains that this name was not Joseph Smith's creation, but was in fact "revealed" to him by the Lord. When an anonymous Latter-day Saint writer first pointed this out, the Tanners somewhat lamely responded, "We just assumed that people would know this was supposed to be an inspired name."⁸¹ But, of course, nobody else made that assumption, since the Tanners did not provide the full quotation. Moreover, the disingenuousness of that response is quite obvious since the only reason that the Tanners cite the statement at all is to provide

⁸¹ Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Answering Dr. Clandestine: A Response to the Anonymous L.D.S. Historian*, enlarged ed. (Salt Lake City: Utah Lighthouse Ministry, 1978), 35.





evidence that “Joseph Smith certainly *had the ability* to make up ‘new names.’ ”⁸² The Tanners’ unwillingness to admit this obvious fact strongly suggests that their deception is intentional, since the quotation provides no evidence for Joseph Smith’s creative ability beyond their assumption that a revelation did not occur.

The First Vision

Tanner Partial Quotation

Do you suppose that God in person called upon Joseph Smith, our Prophet? God called upon him; But God did not come himself and call, . . . (Tanner and Tanner, *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?* 154)

Full Quotation by Kimball

Do you suppose that God in person called upon Joseph Smith, our Prophet? God called upon him; But God did not come himself and call, but he sent Peter to do it. Do you not see? He sent Peter and sent Moroni to Joseph, and told him that he had got the plates. Did God come himself? No: he sent Moroni and told him there was a record. (Heber C. Kimball, *JD* 6:29)

When the last quotation is read in context it becomes clear that Elder Kimball was not speaking of the First Vision at all, but was speaking of the restoration of the Priesthood and the coming forth of the Book of Mormon.

Other examples could also be cited. However, those listed above, as well as those I mentioned last year,⁸³ are enough to suggest a disturbing pattern of misrepresentation in the Tanners’ writings, which makes it difficult for thoughtful readers to take their work seriously. To paraphrase our critics, perhaps, if the Tanners had “carefully read” the sources they cite, they “would not have fallen into this serious error.” However, whether this pattern is deliberate or simply due to carelessness, it is probably unlikely that the Tanners will ever willingly acknowledge such

⁸² Tanner and Tanner, *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?* 95 (emphasis added).

⁸³ Roper, review of *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?* 171–76.





problems. “We, in fact, fail to see how we have misused the quote[s].”⁸⁴ That blindness reveals more about the authors and their motives than about the Church they so vainly oppose.

⁸⁴ Tanner and Tanner, “Roper Attacks *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?*” 14.

