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## **The Book of Mormon Witnesses and Their Challenge to Secularism**

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# THE BOOK OF MORMON WITNESSES AND THEIR CHALLENGE TO SECULARISM

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Daniel C. Peterson

*There has been much comment recently on the growth in numbers of the religious “nones.” Not all of them are actually non-theists, but secularism or naturalism is undoubtedly on the rise — and Latter-day Saints have not escaped damage from the trend. Several recent books and articles have sought to help their readers live with doubt, cope with uncertainty, or find value or joy in the Mormon community even when some, most, or perhaps even all of its founding narrative has come to seem untenable. I believe, however, that naturalism should be directly challenged and that the Book of Mormon is among our best tools for doing so. And the Witnesses to the Book of Mormon are, in turn, some of our best evidences for its truth — and the only “secular” evidence that the Lord himself has provided.*

The title of this lecture series, *Reason for Hope: Responding to a Secular World*, presupposes that the world — or at least *our* world, the affluent West — is largely and perhaps increasingly secular.<sup>1</sup> This seems to me a reasonable assumption. It also invites participating lecturers to respond to the challenge posed by secularism.

Of late, several books and articles published for a Latter-day Saint audience have sought to help their readers live with doubt, cope with uncertainty, or

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1. These remarks were delivered at a 16 November 2017 symposium, sponsored by Brigham Young University’s Wheatley Institution, dedicated to the topic *Reason for Hope: Responding to a Secular World*. Other participants in the symposium were Julie B. Beck, former general president of the Relief Society of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; Jenet Jacob Erickson, formerly a member of the faculty in BYU’s School of Family Life; and emeritus BYU professor of philosophy C. Terry Warner. The talk is presented here as it was given, which accounts for its somewhat non-academic character and rather loose footnoting.

find value or joy in the Mormon community, even when some or most or perhaps even all of its founding narrative has come to seem untenable.

Such approaches can obviously be helpful to different people in different circumstances. But I see no reason to surrender or to despair or to be resigned — I don't regard palliative care as our only option; I think full and robust spiritual health remains an option for everybody — and so my approach today will be quite different. I intend to challenge secularism directly. Moreover, I propose to do that by means of a resource given to us, in my judgment, very deliberately by God himself.

“Be ready,” says 1 Peter 3:15, “always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you.”

Like the empty tomb on the first Easter morning — for which, by the way, I think the secular evidence is surprisingly solid — the Book of Mormon represents a concrete, tangible challenge to secular or naturalistic understandings of reality. It exists, and its existence requires explanation.

There are many arguments available in support of the historical authenticity (and hence the divine authority) of the Book of Mormon — ancient Middle Eastern parallels, corroborating linguistic features, elements of Mesoamerican archaeology, and so forth — and I myself have written extensively on such topics. I think they're very much worth pursuing, and they can often be quite powerful.

(Lately, to name just a few recent items, I'm especially intrigued by the research of Royal Skousen and Stan Carmack demonstrating the humanly inexplicable presence of Early Modern English in the Book of Mormon; by the work of Brian Stubbs on apparent Egyptian and Semitic influence on the Uto-Aztecan language family; and by Matthew Bowen's examination of Semitic wordplays in Book of Mormon names — all of which appear or are discussed in *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture*.)

But, if I may so term it, only one “secular” or “objective” argument for the Book of Mormon directly involves divine aid. Only one that, from the beginning, was directly ordered by God. I'm referring, of course, to two solemn declarations — “The Testimony of Three Witnesses” and “The Testimony of Eight Witnesses” — that have been published with the Book of Mormon since 1830.

Significantly, both of the declarations — of the Three and of the Eight Witnesses — and both taken together eliminate the possibility that all of this rests merely on Joseph Smith's imagination, whether that imagination is deemed deranged or deceptive. He isn't the only person who claimed to perceive these things. Others claimed to have seen, and in some cases to have handled, the related physical artifacts as well.

Joseph grasped the import of this point very clearly. In her *History*, Joseph's mother, Lucy Mack Smith, records his relief after the Three Witnesses had their experience:

Joseph threw himself down beside me, and exclaimed, ... “you do not know how happy I am: the Lord has now caused the plates to be shown to three more besides myself. They have seen an angel ... and they will have to bear witness to the truth of what I have said, for now they know for themselves, that I do not go about to deceive the people, and I feel as if I was relieved of a burden which was almost too heavy for me to bear.”<sup>2</sup>

Very importantly, however, the two statements — of the Three and the Eight — are distinctly different both in their tone and in what they describe.

In the first, Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris affirm that they've seen the plates from which Joseph translated the Book of Mormon. But they also claim to have seen the angel who brought those plates and to have heard the voice of God himself testifying to the truth of the volume and commanding the witnesses to testify of its truth. Their statement is overtly and strongly religious in tone.

By contrast, the statement of the Eight Witnesses is strikingly sober, legalistic (note, for example, its three rather dry references to “the said Smith”), quite reserved (e.g. “the plates ... have the appearance of gold” as well as “the appearance of ancient work”), and almost distinctly nonreligious in tone. No divine voice is mentioned nor is any angelic appearance. God is invoked, but solely as guarantor of the truth of their affirmation, rather in the manner of courtroom testimony or the pronouncing of a solemn oath. They too claim to have seen the plates; unlike the three, however, they also claim to have “hefted” those plates, and to have “handled” them one by one.

What is the point of having these two distinct declarations?

One thing, at least, is clear: They make the task of coming up with a single naturalistic explanation of the witnesses considerably more difficult.

Someone determined to reject the testimony of the Three Witnesses, for example, might argue that their experience was merely “visionary,” and, thus — if visions are decreed to be impossible — the product of hallucination or overactive imaginations. And the same would have to be said of Mary Whitmer, the mother of the witnesses David, Jacob,

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2. Lavina Fielding Anderson, ed., *Lucy's Book: A Critical Edition of Lucy Mack Smith's Family Memoir* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2001), 453.

John, Christian, and Peter Whitmer Jr., who also saw the plates and, evidently, an angel.

However, although some have also sought to dismiss the experience of the Eight Witnesses as merely visionary (which, they insist, naturally means merely imaginary), it occurred in broad daylight and remains stubbornly matter-of-fact.<sup>3</sup> It seems to have included no explicitly supernatural elements.

In late 1839, Hyrum Smith wrote an account for the *Times and Seasons* newspaper covering, among other things, his four months of hungry and cold imprisonment in Missouri's ironically named Liberty Jail, under recurring threats of execution, while his family and fellow members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints were being driven from their homes during the wintertime:

"I thank God," he told the Saints,

that I felt a determination to die, rather than deny the things which my eyes had seen, which my hands had handled, and which I had borne testimony to. ... I can assure my beloved brethren that I was enabled to bear as strong a testimony, when nothing but death presented itself, as ever I did in my life.<sup>4</sup>

One might dismiss this declaration of willingness to die for his testimony as an empty boast, mere retrospective bravado, were it not for the fact that, fewer than five years later in Illinois, fully understanding the risk, he did in fact go voluntarily to Carthage Jail. There, with his prophet-brother, he died a martyr — which, in ancient Greek, means "witness" — in a hail of bullets.

The accounts left behind by the Eight Witnesses are replete not only with claims to have "seen and hefted" the plates, to have turned their individual leaves and examined their engravings, but also with estimates of their weight, descriptions of their physical form and the rings that bound them, and reports of their approximate dimensions as well.

Wilhelm Poulson's 1878 interview with John Whitmer provides an excellent summary:

I — Did you handle the plates with your hands? He — I did so!

I — Then they were a material substance? He — Yes, as

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3. See Richard Lloyd Anderson, "Attempts to Redefine the Experience of the Eight Witnesses," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 14/1 (2005); Steven C. Harper, "Evaluating the Book of Mormon Witnesses," *Religious Educator* 11/2 (2010).

4. Hyrum Smith, "To the Saints Scattered Abroad," *Times and Seasons* 1 (December 1839): 20.

material as anything can be.

I — They were heavy to lift? He — Yes, and you know gold is a heavy metal, they were very heavy.

I — How big were the leaves? He — So far as I can recollect, 8 by 6 or 7 inches.

I — Were the leaves thick? He — Yes, just so thick, that characters could be engraven on both sides.

I — How were the leaves joined together? He — In three rings, each one in the shape of a D with the straight line towards the centre. ...

I — Did you see them covered with a cloth? He — No. He handed them uncovered into our hands, and we turned the leaves sufficient to satisfy us.<sup>5</sup>

William Smith, who knew the Eight Witnesses well — his father and two of his brothers were among them — explained “they not only saw with their eyes but handled with their hands the said record.”<sup>6</sup> Daniel Tyler heard Samuel Smith testify that “He knew his brother Joseph had the plates, for the prophet had shown them to him, and he had handled them and seen the engravings thereon.”<sup>7</sup>

Those who seek to dismiss the testimony of the Eight Witnesses must, on the whole, flatly brush aside what those Witnesses actually and very forcefully said.

If their worldview demands it, though, many skeptics are admittedly up to the task of dismissing the experience of all of the witnesses as merely hallucinatory: “Once you eliminate the impossible,” Sherlock Holmes explains in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s 1890 story “The Sign of the Four,” “whatever remains, no matter how improbable, must be the truth.” And for certain anti-theists, visions and the supernatural — and ancient Nephite gold plates — are flatly impossible.

In other words, if we respect the primary historical sources, the explanation that skeptics favor for the Three Witnesses — hallucination

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5. Cited by Lyndon W. Cook, *The Revelations of the Prophet Joseph Smith: A Historical and Biographical Commentary of the Doctrine and Covenants* (Provo, UT: Seventy’s Mission Bookstore, 1981), 25.

6. Anderson, “Attempts to Redefine the Experience of the Eight Witnesses,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 14/1 (2005), 29.

7. Cited in Richard L. Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 140.

or imagination — simply can't work for the Eight Witnesses, nor for several ancillary witnesses.

Lucy Mack Smith “examined” the Urim and Thummim and “found that it consisted of two smooth three-cornered diamonds set in glass, and the glasses were set in silver bows, which were connected with each other in much the same way as old fashioned spectacles.”<sup>8</sup>

Describing the Nephite breastplate, she recalled that

It was wrapped in a thin muslin handkerchief, so thin that I could see the glistening metal, and ascertain its proportions without any difficulty.

It was concave on one side and convex on the other, and extended from the neck downwards, as far as the centre of the stomach of a man of extraordinary size. It had four straps of the same material, for the purpose of fastening it to the breast, two of which ran back to go over the shoulders, and the other two were designed to fasten to the hips. They were just the width of two of my fingers, (for I measured them,) and they had holes in the ends of them, to be convenient in fastening.<sup>9</sup>

William Smith, not one of the Eight Witnesses, repeatedly told of his own experience with the plates:

I handled them and hefted them while wrapped in a tow frock and judged them to have weighed about sixty pounds. I could tell they were plates of some kind and that they were fastened together by rings running through the back.<sup>10</sup>

Joseph's wife Emma and his sister Katharine both had to move the plates about on more than one occasion. Later, too, Emma testified that

The plates often lay on the table without any attempt at concealment, wrapped in a small linen table cloth, which I had given him to fold them in. I once felt of the plates as they thus lay on the table, tracing their outline and shape. They seemed to be pliable like thick paper, and would rustle with a metallic sound when the edges were moved by the thumb, as one sometimes thumb the edges of a book.<sup>11</sup>

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8. Anderson, *Lucy's Book*, 379.

9. *Ibid.*, 390.

10. Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, 24.

11. Joseph Smith III, “Last Testimony of Sister Emma,” *Saints' Advocate* (2 October 1879): 52, 289–90.



A conscientious unbeliever is required, accordingly, to assume fake artifacts, for the creation of which absolutely no evidence exists — and no sign, among Joseph Smith’s associates, of the required fabrication skills. Moreover, as later statements from the Three Witnesses indicate, they saw not only the plates but various other objects (e.g., the Liahona, the sword of Laban, the Urim and Thummim and breastplate) that only an expert metalworker could have forged.

But let’s return to the suggestion that the Three Witnesses were merely hallucinating. Dismissing even the testimony of the three is more difficult than some seem to imagine, for their experience didn’t occur all at one time. To the contrary, it occurred on two separate occasions. And something experienced by three distinct persons besides Joseph Smith and — since Martin Harris received his witness separately from Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer — at two distinct times and in two distinct locations is substantially harder to brush off than an experience claimed by only a single individual.

After all, as the evangelical philosopher Gary Habermas has observed regarding Christ’s post-resurrection appearance to the eleven apostles, “Hallucinations are private events observed by one person alone. Two people cannot see the same hallucination, let alone eleven.”

Please note, by the way, that Professor Habermas’s comment applies remarkably well to the official Book of Mormon Witnesses, of whom there were — perhaps not coincidentally — exactly eleven.

In support of his position, Habermas cites personal correspondence “from a well-published psychologist,” who writes:

Hallucinations are individual occurrences. By their very nature only one person can see a given hallucination at a time. They certainly are not something which can be seen by a group of people. Neither is it possible that one person could somehow induce an hallucination in somebody else. Since an hallucination exists only in this subjective, personal sense, it is obvious that others cannot witness it.<sup>12</sup>

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12. Gary R. Habermas and Antony G. N. Flew, *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead? The Resurrection Debate* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), 50. The “well-published psychologist” is Gary R. Collins, cited from personal correspondence with Gary R. Habermas, dated 21 February 1977. See also J. P. Brady, “The Veridicality of Hypnotic, Visual Hallucinations,” in Wolfram Keup, *Origin and Mechanisms of Hallucinations* (New York: Plenum Press, 1970), 181; Weston La Barre, “Anthropological Perspectives on Hallucination and Hallucinogens,” in

“Hallucination is a solitary phenomenon,” agrees the Catholic writer Karl Keating. “In medical literature, there are no records of even two people having the same hallucination at the same time.”<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps I can illustrate my point with a quotation from Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Theseus, the Duke of Athens, and his bride-to-be, Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons, have just heard the tale told by the lovers Hermia, Lysander, Helena, and Demetrius, of strange transformations and fairies in the woods. Hippolyta is impressed and puzzled by the story:

Hippolyta: “’Tis strange, my Theseus, that these lovers speak of.”

Theseus: “More strange than true: I never may believe  
These antique fables, nor these fairy toys. . .”

Hippolyta: “But all the story of the night told over,  
And all their minds transfigured so together,  
More witnesseth than fancy’s images  
And grows to something of great constancy.”<sup>14</sup>

Now *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is obviously fiction, and fiction of the most fantastic kind. Still, within the framework of the play, we know that the lovers’ story is actually true and that Oberon, Titania, Puck, and the others were in fact active realities. Hippolyta’s point is an entirely sound one. The consistency of the tale told by various witnesses indicates that it rests upon more than mere imagination.

William E. McLellin was chosen as one of the Twelve Apostles in 1835 but was excommunicated from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in 1838. However, he never abandoned his faith in the Book of Mormon, and one of the pillars of his faith rested upon his early, searching interviews with the witnesses to that book. He was a highly intelligent man (and, it seems, a rather irascible one), and he was very careful and intent upon getting at the truth.

McLellin left a number of statements on his investigations. This one comes from a previously unpublished manuscript he wrote between January 1871 and January 1872. I find it fascinating and, since I don’t think it’s very well known, I’ll quote it at length:

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*Hallucinations: Behavior, Experience and Theory* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1975), 9-10.

13. Karl Keating, *What Catholics Really Believe: 52 Answers to Common Misconceptions About the Faith* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 73-4.

14. William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, V.i.1-4, 23-6.

In 1833, when mobbing reigned triumphant in Jackson Co. Mo. I and O. Cowdery fled from our homes, for fear of personal violence on Saturday the 20th day of July. The mob dispersed, agreeing to meet again on the next Tuesday. They offered eighty dollars reward for any one who would deliver Cowdery or McLellan in Independence on Tuesday. On Mond[ay] I slipped down into the Whitmer's settlement, and there in the lonely woods I met with David Whitmer and Oliver Cowdery. I said to them, "brethren I have never seen an open vision in my life, but you men say you have, and therefore you positively know. Now you know that our lives are in danger every hour, if the mob can only catch us. Tell me in the fear of God, is that book of Mormon true? Cowdery looked at me with solemnity depicted in his face, and said, "Brother William, God sent his holy angel to declare the truth of the translation of it to us, and therefore we know. And though the mob kill us, yet we must die declaring its truth." David said, "Oliver has told you the solemn truth, for we could not be deceived. I most truly declare ~~declare~~ to you its truth!!" Said I, boys I believe you. I can see no object for you to tell me false <hood> now, when our lives are endangered. Eight men testify also to handling that sacred pile of plates, from which Joseph Smith <read off the> translation that heavenly Book.

And he continues:

One circumstance I'll relate of one of these eight witnesses. While the mob was raging in Jackson Co. Mo. in 1833 some young men ran down Hiram Page <in the woods> one of the eight <witnesses,> and commenced beating and pounding him with whips and clubs. He begged, but there was no mercy. They said he was <a> damned Mormon, and they meant to beat him to death! But finally one then said to him, if you will deny that damned book, we will let you go. Said he, how can I deny what I know to be true? Then they pounded him again. When they thought he was about to breathe his last, they said to him, Now what do you think of your God, when he dont save you? Well said he, I believe in God-Well, said one of the most intelligent among them, I believe the damned fool will stick to it though we kill him. Let us let him go. But his life was nearly run out. He was confined to his bed for a length of

time. So much for a man who knows for himself. Knowledge is beyond faith or doubt. It is positive certainty.

I in company with <a> friend, <I> visited one of the eight witnesses <in 1869>—the only one who is now alive, and he bore a very lucid and rational testimony, and gave us many interesting particulars. He was a young man when he had those testimonies. He is ~~now~~ <was then> sixty eight years old, and still he is firm in his faith. Now I would ask what will I do with such a cloud of faithful witnesses, bearing such a rational and yet solemn testimony? These men while in the prime of life, saw the vision of the angel, and bore their testimony to all people. And eight men saw the plates, and handled them. Hence these men all knew the things they declared to be positively true. And that too while they were young, and now when old they declare the same things.<sup>15</sup>

William McLellin was closely acquainted with the Smith and Whitmer families from the time of his 1831 conversion. He carefully questioned them about the Book of Mormon. In 1880, long alienated from Mormonism, he still asserted their credibility: “I believed them then and I believe them yet.”<sup>16</sup>

The Book of Mormon has sometimes been explained as the product not of simple fraud perpetrated by one fiendishly, peerlessly clever individual (Joseph Smith), but of a more complex, collective fraud. We might call this notion “Collective Deceit” (deception, that is, by Joseph Smith, the witnesses of the Book of Mormon, and presumably others).

This hypothesis would explain the “supernatural” events associated with the recovery of the Book of Mormon by declaring, simply, that they never happened. Everybody testifying to them must have been lying to further a grand conspiracy.

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15. These paragraphs come from Mitchell K. Schaefer, ed., *William E. McLellin's Lost Manuscript* (Salt Lake City: Eborn Books, 2012), 166–67. The editorial marks (and McLellin's curious misspelling of his own name) and the occasional omitted word are all faithfully reproduced and double-checked. The witness whom McLellin visited in 1869 must have been John Whitmer, who died in 1878.

16. Published in Larry C. Porter, “William E. McLellan's Testimony of the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies* 10/4 (Summer 1970): 485–87.

However, such an explanation collides with abundant evidence regarding the character of Joseph Smith.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, it clashes directly with what we know about the character of the witnesses and their subsequent behavior.<sup>18</sup>

Many of those who interviewed David Whitmer, one of the Three Witnesses, over his last decades noted the reverential awe with which he regarded the manuscript of the Book of Mormon that he had in his possession. He refused to part with it for any price, although he was by no means wealthy, and both he and his family felt not only that it was divinely protected but that they would share in that divine protection so long as they owned it.<sup>19</sup> Whether their sense of the manuscript's near-supernatural potency was misplaced or not is irrelevant to the issue at hand: Such attitudes are impossible to square with cynicism and conscious deception.

David Whitmer was once confronted by a mob of 400-500 Missourians who demanded, on pain of death, that he deny his published testimony of the Book of Mormon. Instead, he forcefully reasserted it. Neither he nor the other witnesses come across as cynical conspirators.<sup>20</sup>

There is simply no sign of dishonesty and no evidence for a conspiracy among Joseph Smith's associates — and, in the case of a group so large (eleven official witnesses, plus Mary Whitmer, Emma Smith, Lucy Mack Smith and William Smith), it would have been inconceivably difficult to keep such a conspiracy secret. Particularly so since the alleged conspirators suffered a great deal (including death, in a few cases) for their supposed plot, gained nothing, were (in many cases) alienated from Joseph Smith and, collectively, lived several decades after the death of the Prophet, and were entirely isolated from any supportive or ego-gratifying community.

As the lawyer James H. Moyle, who had interviewed David Whitmer, justly observed, "If there had been fraud in this matter Joseph Smith would have cultivated those men and kept them with him at any cost. The truth is that when they became unworthy they were excommunicated, even though they were witnesses to the Book of Mormon."<sup>21</sup>

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17. See, for example, the materials gathered by Mark McConkie in his 2003 book *Remembering Joseph*.

18. The relevant information is most conveniently summarized in various works by Richard Lloyd Anderson, including his classic *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*.

19. See Lyndon W. Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews: A Restoration Witness* (Orem, UT: Grandin Book Company, 1991).

20. See generally Anderson's *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*.

21. As cited in Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews*, 169.

In a letter dated 22 September 1899, David Whitmer's grandson, private secretary, and business partner George Schweich recalled of his grandfather, "I have begged him to unfold the fraud in the case and he had all to gain and nothing to lose but to speak the word if he thought so — but he has described the scene to me many times, of his vision about noon in an open pasture — there is only one explanation barring an actual miracle and that is this — If that vision was not real it was HYPNOTISM, it was real to grandfather IN FACT."<sup>22</sup>

I've argued that hallucination, whether individual or collective, cannot explain the facts surrounding the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. But the facts are heavily against conscious conspiracy, too. As the early 19th-century Mormon convert John Corrill remarked, "As to its being a revelation from God, eleven persons besides Smith bore positive testimony of its truth. After getting acquainted with them, I was unable to impeach their testimony, and consequently thought that it was as consistent to give credit to them as credit the writings of the New Testament, when I had never seen the authors nor the original copy."<sup>23</sup>

What are the principal objections to the witness' testimonies? I routinely encounter the confident declaration that the witnesses to the Book of Mormon didn't really see or touch anything at all and didn't actually claim to have seen or touched anything. They only "saw" the plates with their "spiritual eyes," I'm assured, and "spiritual eyes," to them, means "in their imaginations."

I'll leave aside the question of whether it's even remotely plausible that the witnesses sacrificed so very much for something they recognized as merely imaginary. Let's look at their explicit verbal testimonies. Several of the eleven official witnesses were obviously confronted during their lifetimes with accusations that they had merely hallucinated, and they repeatedly rejected such proposed explanations.

In fact, David Whitmer, one of the initial Three Witnesses, could easily have been addressing today's skeptics when he declared "I was not under any hallucination, nor was I deceived! I saw with these eyes and I heard with these ears! I know whereof I speak!"<sup>24</sup>

It's difficult to imagine how he could have been any clearer.

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22. Capital letters in the original, in Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews*, 255-56.

23. Cited by Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, 188-89.

24. Interview with Joseph Smith III, et al. (Richmond, Missouri, July 1884), originally published in *The Saints' Herald* (28 January 1936) and reprinted in Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews*, 134-35 (emphasis in the original). Compare Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews*, 92, 188, 192-93.

And listen, once more, to Hyrum Smith's declaration about the months he spent in Liberty Jail, condemned to death: "I thank God that I felt a determination to die, rather than deny the things which my eyes had seen, which my hands had handled."<sup>25</sup>

Some years ago while driving through the countryside just north of Kansas City, Missouri, my wife and I saw a number of banners hanging at various Protestant churches, inviting people to join tours to the Holy Land. I lead tours to biblical sites myself; I recognize that visiting such places has enormous spiritual and educational value. However, western Missouri itself is the burial place of several much more recent eyewitnesses who are, in important ways, comparable to the early disciples of Jesus. They too saw. They too knew for themselves.

And with the plates, as with the incarnation of Christ himself, we have a fully material, entirely tangible incursion of the divine into our mundane world, a very palpable refutation of the secular worldview.

But aren't such testimonies a dime a dozen? Isn't there an obvious parallel in the case of James J. Strang, the leader of a short-lived splinter group after the murder of Joseph Smith?

Let's have a look.<sup>26</sup>

Though little remembered today, James Jesse Strang campaigned seriously to lead the LDS Church after Joseph Smith's 1844 assassination.

When the general membership rejected the obscure new convert's claim that a secret letter had appointed him as Joseph Smith's successor, Strang started his own sect, ultimately headquartered on Beaver Island, Michigan. Like Joseph, he eventually claimed to have translated ancient metal plates and provided eleven corroborating eyewitnesses.

By 1856, when he himself was murdered, he had several thousand followers, including members of Joseph Smith's family, former apostles, and Book of Mormon witnesses.

Incidentally, the fact that some Book of Mormon witnesses credited Strang argues for their sincerity: Had they been knowing perpetrators of a fraud with Joseph Smith, they would likely have been far more skeptical of Strang.

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25. Smith, "To the Saints Scattered Abroad," 20.

26. What follows is drawn from Milo Milton Quaife, *The Kingdom of Saint James: A Narrative of the Mormons* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1930); Roger Van Noord, *The King of Beaver Island* (Champaign/Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

But does the fact that Strang had witnesses like Joseph's mean that, for consistency's sake, modern believers in Mormonism must either accept Strang's claims or reject both Joseph and Strang?

No. Because the two sets of witnesses and their experiences were very different.

The two sets of inscribed plates that Strang claimed to have found in Wisconsin and Michigan beginning in 1845 almost certainly existed. Milo Quaipe's early, standard biography of Strang reflects that, while Strang's angelic visitations "may have had only a subjective existence in the brain of the man who reported them, the metallic plates possessed a very material objective reality."

And they were almost certainly forgeries.

The first set, the three "Voree" or "Rajah Manchou" plates, were dug up by four "witnesses" whom Strang had taken to the plates' burial place. Illustrated and inscribed on both sides, the Rajah Manchou plates were roughly 1.5 by 2.75 inches in size — small enough to fit in the palm of a hand or to carry in a pocket.

Among the many who saw them was Stephen Post, who reported that they were brass and, indeed, that they resembled the French brass used in familiar kitchen kettles. "With all the faith & confidence that I could exercise," he wrote, "all that I could realize was that Strang made the plates himself, or at least that it was possible that he made them." One source reports that most of the four witnesses to the Rajah Manchou plates ultimately repudiated their testimonies.

The 18 "Plates of Laban," likewise of brass and each about 7.5 by 9 inches, were first mentioned in 1849 and were seen by seven witnesses in 1851. These witnesses' testimony was published as a preface to "The Book of the Law of the Lord," which Strang said he derived from the "Plates of Laban." (He appears to have begun the "translation" at least as early as April 1849. An 84-page version appeared in 1851; by 1856, it had reached 350 pages.) Strang's witnesses report seeing the plates but mention nothing miraculous. Nor did Strang supply any additional supporting testimony comparable to that of the Three Witnesses to the Book of Mormon.

One of the witnesses to the "Plates of Laban," Samuel P. Bacon, eventually denied the inspiration of Strang's movement and denounced it as mere "human invention." Another, Samuel Graham, later claimed that he had actually assisted Strang in the creation of the plates.

"We can hardly escape the conclusion," writes Quaipe, "that Strang knowingly fabricated and planted them for the purpose of duping his credulous followers"; and, accordingly, that "Strang's prophetic career was



a false and impudent imposture.” A more recent biographer, Roger Van Noord, concludes that “based on the evidence, it is probable that Strang — or someone under his direction — manufactured the letter of appointment and the brass plates to support his claim to be a prophet and to sell land at Voree. If this scenario is correct, Strang’s advocacy of himself as a prophet was more than suspect, but no psychological delusion.”

Thus, Strang’s plates were much less numerous than those of the Book of Mormon, his witnesses saw nothing supernatural, and his translation required the better part of a decade rather than a little more than two months. (Quite unlike the semiliterate Joseph Smith, Strang was well-read. He had been an editor and lawyer before his involvement with Mormonism.) Perhaps most strikingly, unlike the witnesses to the Book of Mormon, at least some of Strang’s witnesses later denied their testimonies.

The contrasts work very much in Joseph Smith’s favor.

I’ve only begun to scratch the surface of the case that can be made for the reliability of the Book of Mormon witnesses. Our time is far too short to do the matter justice.

But I want to indicate very clearly what their testimony entails, if it’s accepted. For one thing, acceptance of their accounts entails that there were tangible, real, material plates — which effectively eliminates the stance that the Book of Mormon represents only Joseph Smith’s imagination. And, since collective hallucination is vanishingly unlikely, it means either that they were dupes of a fraud or themselves partners in one. But what we know about their characters and of their biographies, to say nothing of Joseph’s, makes the idea that they were engaged in a conspiracy to commit fraud extremely difficult to maintain. Nor is there anything to suggest that Joseph or anybody in his circle had the ability to manufacture bogus plates.

Let’s return for a moment to the dictum of Sherlock Holmes: “Once you eliminate the impossible,” he said, “whatever remains, no matter how improbable, must be the truth.”

If theism and revelation aren’t deemed altogether impossible, the testimonies of the witnesses must be taken very seriously.

I realize that rejection of Joseph Smith doesn’t require the abandonment of theism. There are many other options on the market. But let’s close by considering what is involved in opting for a completely secular worldview. What is that alternative?

“Apathism” is the witty term coined for the complete indifference to great issues of faith and religion that’s fashionable in some circles.

“If there were a God,” a supremely complacent atheist once told me online, “I think (s)he’d enjoy hanging out with me — perhaps sipping on a fine Merlot under the night sky while devising a grand unified theory.”

“If you live in this very moment,” another atheist wrote to me a year later, “you’ll find happiness. You realize that life isn’t about getting to the shore. It’s about enjoying the feel of the water glide against your skin, feeling the power in your arms as you systematically push water behind you, deeply breathing the fresh salty air, feeling a moment of awe as you turn your head and see the sunset, and feeling the love that you share with your fellow swimmers. This life is a precious thing in and of itself. There may be something beyond it, there may not. But this life is wonderful enough.”

I understand his attitude; things can be very good indeed for those who win life’s lottery. But it hasn’t been so good for many, and there’s nobody for whom it’s always grand.

Speaking very broadly and taking the religious or theistic and the naturalistic or materialistic positions in their most generic sense, it must be said that, if it’s true, the naturalistic position is very bad news for the generality of humankind, whereas the religious position, if true, is deeply good news.

This isn’t to say that atheists can’t point to and enjoy human goodness and love, the satisfactions of family life and community, various physical pleasures, aesthetic appreciation, creative expression, the glories of nature, the quest for scientific understanding, food, sports, and entertainment. They surely can, and all these unquestionably are, or can be, good.

But the simple fact is that a substantial proportion of humanity has been largely denied access to such things. Perhaps even, speaking historically, an overwhelming majority. Those who profit from material prosperity in stable societies, who benefit from adequate nutrition and decent medical care, who enjoy reasonably good health and have received fairly solid educations, who have been born into rich and relatively healthy cultures — those who, in the late British philosopher John Hick’s phrase, “have been lucky in the lottery of life” — have a shot at more or less happy lives.

Even in such cases, though, happiness is scarcely guaranteed.

“I will say nothing against the course of my existence,” the great German poet and philosopher Johann Wolfgang von Goethe wrote in 1824. “But at bottom it has been nothing but pain and burden, and I can affirm that during the whole of my 75 years, I have not had four weeks of

genuine well-being. It is but the perpetual rolling of a rock that must be raised up again forever.”<sup>27</sup>

Even the most fortunate of humans will have their illnesses, their sorrows and bereavements, their frustrations and missed opportunities, and their ruptured relationships, although these will befall them in a generally positive context. They will inevitably encounter pain, sorrow, grief, disappointment, despair, frustration, sickness, aging, and, finally, death. But there will be some compensating satisfactions.

For those, by contrast, who suffer from congenitally poor health, whose lives are blighted by plague or war or political oppression, who are mired in hopeless poverty, there is no favorable context to which they can return. There will be relatively few compensations — and perhaps essentially none at all.

Any atheist or humanist, to be realistic, must acknowledge this fact. But it isn't often that such atheists or humanists, at least in the West — belonging, as they do, to the well-educated, comfortable, lucky elite — seem to realize the depths of the pointlessness and the hopelessly inescapable misery to which their sunny nihilism condemns the majority of their fellow human beings.

“If I were to die now,” commented a nineteenth-century atheist cited by the great Harvard philosopher and psychologist William James,

being in a healthy condition for my age, both mentally and physically, I would just as lief, yes, rather, die with a hearty enjoyment of music, sport, or any other rational pastime. As a timepiece stops, we die — there being no immortality in either case.<sup>28</sup>

But most people don't die suddenly. Most of us don't pass painlessly from robust health into oblivion while accompanied by a first-rate string quartet. Rather — whether for a brief period or over the course of a lengthy decline — they suffer physical deterioration and the loss of mental faculties. And, for all too many even today, this concludes lifetimes of frustration, hunger, humiliation, pain, and injustice.

Perhaps 40 percent of the population of classical Athens were slaves. In ancient wars, husbands and fathers were often put to the sword; their women and children were enslaved without rights. But urban slaves were

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27. Cited at William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature, Being the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion Delivered at Edinburgh in 1901-1902* (New York and London: Longmans, Green, 1902), 137.

28. Cited at James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 92.

the lucky ones. Others went to the Athenian silver mines, where, rarely seeing the sun, they were harshly beaten, starved, and worked to death.

Nearby Sparta depended upon a population of “helots,” fellow Greeks — seven for every citizen — who farmed the city’s lands under continual military occupation. Sparta’s teenagers honed their military skills by roaming in gangs through the helots’ settlements, terrorizing them and destroying their hovels. And every year, somewhat in the spirit of *The Hunger Games*, Sparta’s rulers declared ritual war on the helots, murdering anybody who showed signs of leadership.

Such was life for many in classical Greece, at the fountainhead of Western civilization. And conditions surely weren’t better under the ancient Assyrians or Babylonians, or the medieval Huns and Mongols.

While comfortable people often observe that money doesn’t bring happiness, poverty and hunger make happiness very elusive. According to the United Nations World Food Programme, one in nine people is chronically undernourished, therefore lacking the energy and mental acuity needed for a full life. One quarter of those in sub-Saharan Africa suffer from malnutrition. More than three million children under the age of five die from malnourishment each year. And I’ve said nothing about the cruelty of oppressive armies and murderous tyrants.

In his 1870 *Grammar of Assent*, John Henry Newman quotes the words of a dying factory girl from a then-popular story:

I think if this should be the end of all, and if all I have been born for is just to work my heart and life away, and to sicken in this (dreary) place, with those millstones in my ears for ever, until I could scream out for them to stop and let me have a little piece of quiet, and with the fluff filling my lungs, until I thirst to death for one long deep breath of the clear air, and my mother gone, and I never able to tell her again how I loved her, and of all my troubles, — I think, if this life is the end, and there is no God to wipe away all tears from all eyes, I could go mad!<sup>29</sup>

Even for fate’s most favored children, there will inevitably be regrets and areas of disappointment.

“Take the happiest man,” suggests William James, “the one most envied by the world, and in nine cases out of ten his inmost consciousness is one of failure. Either his ideals in the line of his achievements are pitched far higher than the achievements themselves, or else he has

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29. John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979 [1870]), 247–48.

secret ideals of which the world knows nothing, and in regard to which he inwardly knows himself to be found wanting.”<sup>30</sup>

None of this, of course, demonstrates that there is a God, nor that we are immortal, nor that a world of compensating rewards awaits us on the other side of the grave. But certainly it illustrates why the question of whether such a world exists is and ought to be of profound concern to normal people. “Apathism” is an expression, it seems to me, of thoughtless complacency.

Moreover, increased secularization is likely to have negative consequences for the poor and disadvantaged even in this life.

For as long as I can remember, those who disagree with my fairly libertarian economic views have told me how much more they care about the poor than I do. And nonreligious people have assured me that, while I’m supposedly focused on some sort of illusory “pie in the sky when I die” and on “saving” others from mythical sufferings in a fairy-tale afterlife, they’re devoted to making life in this world, on this planet, tangibly better for everybody.

In my particular case, the critics may be right. They’re very likely far better people than I am — more charitable, kinder, more concerned for their fellow humans. However, unless they actually supply evidence to demonstrate it, recent research has made it much, much harder for secularists to preen themselves, as a class, on their superior compassion.

Arthur Brooks, formerly a professor of public administration in the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University in New York and now president of the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, DC, has studied patterns in charitable giving and service for many years and is widely recognized as perhaps the pre-eminent authority on the subject. Still, he reports that even he has been surprised by what he has found.<sup>31</sup>

Religious people, it turns out, give more to charity than do nonreligious people. They donate more money — and not merely to their churches, synagogues, temples, and mosques. “Religious people are more charitable in every measurable nonreligious way — including secular donations, informal giving, and even acts of kindness and honesty — than secularists.” They’re more likely to give money to family and friends, and, when they do, to give larger amounts. They’re more likely to volunteer and to give blood. Even non-churchgoers, if they were

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30. James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 137.

31. The data here are taken from Arthur C. Brooks, *The Surprising Truth About Compassionate Conservatism: Who Really Cares* (New York: Basic Books, 2006).

raised in religious households, are more likely to donate to charity than those who were not.

Not surprisingly, private charity in ever-more-secular Europe has plummeted — to the point, in some areas, almost of extinction. Brooks, who also argues that charitable giving is essential to a strong economy, points to polling data suggesting that Europeans are, according to their own reports, less happy with their lives than Americans are, and suggests that their unhappiness may be connected with their low rates of charity and volunteerism. Humans feel better when they give.

As befits a premier social scientist, Brooks concentrates heavily on multiple streams of contemporary statistical data to form his judgments. However, the historical record also seems to support the general conclusions of his very important book:

Rodney Stark, in an insightful 1996 study of *The Rise of Christianity*, has shown that the superior charity of the ancient Christians was a vital factor in the rapid growth of the early Christian movement. And, as an examination of the surviving sources demonstrates, even the pagans recognized that. “The impious Galileans support not only their poor, but ours as well,” lamented the fourth-century Roman Emperor Julian (known to subsequent history as “the Apostate” for his efforts to turn back the religious tide even after his uncle Constantine had declared Christianity the official religion of the empire). “Everyone can see that our people lack aid from us.”

“Religion is the opiate of the people,” Karl Marx famously complained. Elsewhere, he remarked that, while “philosophers have said that the purpose of philosophy is to understand the world, the purpose is to change it.” Religion, in his view, was a distraction from the real business of making this world a better place. Unfortunately for Marx’s thesis, though (and even more so for those who had to live through the 20th century), the millennium recently closed was heavily influenced at its end by Marxism and by a related ideology that went under the names of fascism and “National Socialism” or Nazism. We now have quite graphic evidence of exactly how such theories tend to “change the world”: Scores of millions of people were murdered, and many national economies were destroyed.

A religious approach to the world and life doesn’t look too bad by contrast. But even when contrasted with the soft secularism — the “apatheism” — that has come to dominate Europe and perhaps Canada and certain portions of the American elite, and even though religious

people can undoubtedly do much more and much better than they are doing now, believers fare pretty well.

None of these sad realities proves the existence of God, life after death, or ultimate justice. In fact, quite understandably, many see in them a powerful argument against God. Surely, though, they illustrate why the hope for eternal joy and compensation is so deeply important.

“In light of heaven,” said Mother Teresa, who was well aware of poverty and human agony, “the worst suffering on Earth, a life full of the most atrocious tortures on Earth, will be seen to be no more serious than one night in an inconvenient hotel.”

If she’s right, that’s fabulous news for everybody who has ever lived.

Finally, if a purely naturalistic secularism is true, might that not entail the death of reason and, strikingly, an inability even to judge whether it’s true or false? If our “thinking” is merely the accidental byproduct of neurochemical processes in our brains, which are in turn the accidental byproducts of a random, meaningless, and undirected process of biological evolution, what real significance should we grant to that “thinking”? Is a brain adapted to survival and reproduction on the African Savannah likely to be well-suited to judging issues of cosmic meaning? And, if, as one reductionist puts it, brains secrete “thinking” the way livers secrete bile, how does it make sense to judge such thinking as either “right” or “wrong”? After all, bile is neither “right” nor “wrong.” Nor is *bile* “about” anything, any more than oxidation or rust is “about” anything. How would it make any more sense to say that the neurochemical processes in Newton’s brain were “about” calculus than to say that his digestive processes were?<sup>32</sup>

It seems arguable, to me, that acceptance of a thoroughgoing naturalism, a complete secularism, might well require the abandonment of reason altogether — and thus, ironically, the abandonment of any ability to argue that secularism is, in fact, true.

I think I’ll stick with theism. *Mormon* theism, in fact. And I recommend that you do, too.

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32. I won’t develop these ideas here, but I’ve been influenced in them by readings in Charles Darwin, C. S. Lewis, Victor Reppert, and others.

*published and spoken extensively on both Islamic and Mormon subjects. Formerly chairman of the board of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) and an officer, editor, and author for its successor organization, the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, his professional work as an Arabist focuses on the Qur'an and on Islamic philosophical theology. He is the author, among other things, of a biography entitled Muhammad: Prophet of God (Eerdmans, 2007).*











