

[Page 175]Review of “Letter to a CES Director: Why I Lost My Testimony,” Jeremy Runnells, April 2013, Updated February 23, 2014. 83 pages. <http://cesletter.com/Letter-to-a-CES-Director.pdf>.

Abstract: *In his Letter to a CES Director, Jeremy Runnells explains how a year of obsessive investigation brought about the loss of his testimony. In an LDS FAQ, LDS blogger Jeff Lindsay deals with all of the same questions, and has done so at least twenty years and has not only an intact testimony, but boundless enthusiasm. What makes the difference? In the parable of the Sower, Jesus explained that the same seeds (words) can generate completely different harvests, ranging from nothing to a hundred-fold increase, all depending on the different soil and nurture. This essay looks at how different expectations and inquiries for translation, prophets, key scriptural passages on representative issues can lead to very different outcomes for investigators.*

Jeremy T. Runnells is a “disaffected Mormon” who describes the grounds of his loss of faith in a website/pdf document published in 2013 called *Letter to a CES Director: Why I Lost My Testimony*. He had been an active LDS until 2012, when he read an account of a news article called “Mormonism Besieged by the Modern Age,” which claimed that Mormons [Page 176]were leaving the church in droves.¹ Disturbed, he reports in his 83-page letter that, “All this information is a result of over a year of intense research and an absolute rabid obsession with Joseph Smith and Church history.”²

Jeff Lindsay, on the other hand, describes himself as an active, believing Latter-day Saint and also an apologist who has been blogging since 1994. His website contains an extensive LDS FAQ (for Frequently Asked Questions)³ which deals with all of the issues that Runnells raises and more. But Lindsay does so both at greater length, over a much broader span of time, consulting a wider range of sources, providing far more documentation, and including far more original research than Runnells. Lindsay demonstrates not just ongoing faith, but boundless enthusiasm.

Why do they come to such different conclusions in dealing with the same questions? The fact is that Lindsay has for at least twenty years confronted the same information that Runnells treats as faith-shattering over a single year. That such different responses to the same information can even exist should demonstrate that neither the issues that Runnells raises nor the information he provides is the real cause of his disillusion. What is? This is my topic.⁴

[Page 177]Runnells presents his information as though making an equation:

Runnells (or anyone) + Questions + Facts = Inevitable Final Negative Conclusion

Comparison with the different conclusions provided by people like Jeff Lindsay, Mike Ash,⁵ hundreds of volunteers at FairMormon, *Interpreter*, FARMS and the current Maxwell Institute, and for that matter, yours truly, well acquainted with the same issues should make it obvious that something other than simple addition of facts is involved.

Investigator [+ | -] Preconceptions/(Adaptive or Brittle interpretive framework) x (Questions generated + Available facts/Selectivity + Contextualization + Subjective weighting for significance/Breadth of relevant knowledge) * Time = Tentative Conclusion

In this more realistic equation, we have a wide range of variables. The effect of these variables means that very different reactions to the same information are not only possible, but very likely. Even if we tried to keep the Questions and Facts as constants, different Preconceptions, Selectivity, Contextualization, Valuations, and Time given to the same issues, we still ought to expect different conclusions. In the parable of the Sower, Jesus explained that the same seeds (words) can generate completely different harvests, ranging from nothing to a hundred-fold increase, all depending on the different soil and nurture. When His disciples asked Him to explain the meaning of that parable, Jesus commented, “Know ye not this parable? How then shall ye know all parables?” (Mark 4:13).

[Page 178]The familiar fable of Henny Penny (also known as Chicken Little) makes a related point. In the fable, a

chicken interprets the fall of an acorn as evidence that “the sky is falling!” Another interpretation of exactly the same event would be, “The sky is not falling, but just an acorn. No big deal. No crisis. Acorns fall from oak trees all the time. It’s natural and to be expected.” Another character in the more cautionary versions of the fable, Foxy Loxy, sees not a crisis, or a non-event, but an opportunity to exploit fear and ignorance for his own gain. Same data. Different interpretation. The information does not speak for itself, but must be interpreted within an informational context and a conceptual framework. By understanding the different ways in which the same information gets processed, the different interpretations and conclusions become understandable.

So one of the first things we ought to consider in approaching questions regarding the LDS (or any other) faith is the clarity of our own perceptions: “Why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother’s eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye? ... First cast the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly” (Matthew 7:3, 5)

How clear is our vision? When we run across something that we didn’t expect, do we shatter like glass and declare that “The sky is falling!” Or do we first stop to ask, “What should I expect?” It helps to realize that information that shatters one set of preconceptions might be handled quite easily by another set: “Neither do men put new wine into old bottles: else the bottles break and the wine runneth out, and the bottles perish: but they put new wine into new bottles, and both are preserved.” (Matthew 9:17). As Hugh Nibley observes, “Things that appear unlikely, impossible, or paradoxical from one point of view often make perfectly good sense from another.”⁶
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Starting Position and What It Tells

So what does Runnells’s *Letter to a CES Director* disclose about his conceptual framework and his method? Start with the very first issue that Runnells raises in his letter, regarding the Book of Mormon translation and “1769 King James edition errors. An ancient text? Errors which are unique to the 1769 edition that Joseph Smith owned?”⁷ He returns to this point in his website response to FairMormon:

The presence of 17th century KJV italics and 1769 KJV errors—word for word—in the Book of Mormon is its own damning evidence. These errors totally undermine the claim that Joseph “translated” the Book of Mormon and the claim that the Book of Mormon is the most correct book on earth.⁸

According to Thomas Kuhn, “Anomaly appears only against the background provided by the paradigm. The more precise and far-reaching that paradigm is, the more sensitive an indicator it provides of anomaly, and hence of an occasion for paradigm change.”⁹

For Runnells the appearance of any imperfection in the Book of Mormon translation seems scandalous to the point of being overwhelming. Betty Edwards explains how our preconceptions inevitably influence our subjective perception of significance:

Most of us tend to see parts of a form hierarchically. The parts that are *important* (that is, provide a lot of information), or the parts that we *decide* are larger, [Page 180] or the parts we think *should be* larger, we *see* as larger than they actually are. Conversely, parts that are unimportant, or that we *decide* are smaller, or that we think *should be* smaller, we *see* as being smaller than they actually are.¹⁰

If the question is the perfection of the Book of Mormon text, and *if we can safely assume* that the beholder is *infallibly capable of detecting it*, imperfection is the only decisive information—indeed, it is the only information that answers the question. Therefore imperfection has crucial importance relative to the question and is actually

perceived in our minds as being large and scandalously important. Even the appearance of imperfection will loom large in our consciousness. No matter how much information might exist to support the notion of a real translation by Joseph Smith, it does not and cannot answer the question of perfection, and therefore, relative to that question, it appears less important. That is why no favorable information regarding the Book of Mormon appears in the *Letter to a CES Director*. Evidence in favor of the Book of Mormon or Joseph Smith's inspiration does not answer the question of perfection, so in setting the table with what counts most to Runnells, none of that kind of information appears.

This also means that if we changed our question from the perfection of the Book of Mormon translation to the reality of the translation, then supposed imperfections would not be as crucially decisive, and would therefore have a smaller significance. The reality of Joseph Smith's inspiration is a different question than the perfection of his inspiration and leads the inquirer to different information. That is why reading books by Hugh Nibley or John Sorenson or Richard L. [Page 181]Anderson or Richard Bushman, John Tvedtnes, John Welch, or Terry L. Givens makes for a very different experience than does reading Runnells's *Letter*. They ask different questions, work with different soil, nurture the seed in a different manner, and produce vastly different harvests.

Consider the difference between perfection and reality through one of the tales of Lancelot, Chrétien de Troyes's *The Knight and the Cart*. The story involves Lancelot going on an elaborate adventure to rescue a captive Queen Guinevere. When, after overcoming many trials, dangers, and obstacles, he finally finds and frees her, she rejects him. Much later, after both the Queen and Lancelot endure more suffering and trauma due to that rejection, she finally refers to a moment, when, in order to obtain crucial information, he needed to travel via a prison cart, and thereby endure public shame. And he did so, after only a moment's hesitation. The Queen's only reaction was, "Why did you hesitate?" as though to her, only that imperfection mattered. And oddly enough, he agrees with her about the devastating significance of that single momentary lapse, based on the peculiar ideals he brings to the issue. A concern about the reality of Lancelot's effort, or even just the success of his effort, rather than perfection relative to the unrealistic ideals of courtly love, would grant weight and significance to all of his actions during his adventure, including a recognition that he overcame his own hesitation in dealing with his pride versus the need to ride the cart. So questions regarding what is real, as opposed to what appears to be perfect and or ideal, raise different issues, and call for a different kind of processing, and consideration of a much wider set of information.

In approaching the Book of Mormon, we could do what Runnells does; look for imperfection, and then display indignation and shock. Or we could ask, how does the Book of Mormon translation and treatment of internal scriptural quotation compare with scriptural quotation within the Bible [Page 182]and compared to the evidence of biblical transmission and translation? Does the Book of Mormon contain information consistent with eyewitness accounts of the times and settings that it claims for itself? Does it accurately describe conditions in Jerusalem, 600 bc? Does it accurately describe cultural and physical conditions in the Arabian desert? Does it accurately describe a Bountiful area at a coastal location east of Nahom? How does the Book of Mormon describe its New World setting? Are there indications of others? What cultures does it describe and what physical settings? Does the description of Cumorah in the Book of Mormon fit the New York hill "of considerable size," or, traditional identifications notwithstanding, should we look elsewhere? What forms of government, politics, religion, and trade does it describe? What are the patterns of warfare, including seasonality, tactics, and weapons? Do the 28 verses describing the Sidon contain enough information to narrow the range of candidate rivers for an external correlation? Can we assume homogeneity and accuracy in all cultural descriptions, that is, can we assume that what Enos says about Lamanite culture from the outside also applies to what we see later when the sons of Mosiah actually travel and live among the Lamanites? What are the best sources of information against which to test its claims? If during the course of my investigation, I run across something that I did not expect, what happens if I then pause to reflect and ask, "What should I expect?" But just as Guinevere only asks about an imperfection in the Lancelot quest, Runnells looks only for imperfection in Mormonism. The eye of the beholder crucially influences the harvest.

A narrow test for perfection brings an ever-present danger that even the appearance of imperfection seems decisive. We risk coming to a false conclusion based on a misperception. This is the theme of Shakespeare's tragedy, *Othello*. Because of the manipulations of Iago, the innocent Desdemona appears to be [Page 183]guilty of betraying Othello's trust. Doubtless the mental pain, anguish, and feeling of betrayal that Othello suffers are real (at least

within the world of the play). But while Othello is busy suffering angst and murdering his innocent wife, the last thing he needs is to be surrounded by understanding and sympathetic Iagos who only want to validate his pain, perhaps suggesting that if he suffocates her sooner and faster, he'll suffer less in the long run. The tragedy of Othello is not that Iago is around to practice deception and manipulation, but that Othello's faith in Desdemona's fidelity is so fragile. He proclaims his love but makes far too little effort to come to her defense, shows no patience or tolerance or capacity for forgiveness or even simple faith, hope, and charity. He never thinks to say, "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone" and never stops to consider that the problem might be in his own misperception, at least, not until it is too late for Desdemona and for himself. It is also clear that after he has killed his wife, the last thing that he wants to discover is her innocence.

All of this calls for a careful examination of our own assumptions and background expectations, doing a little bit of checking our own eyes for beams before attempting mote removal on another person. Remember that Runnells's very first point depends on the un-argued and unexamined assumption that any human error in the Book of Mormon translation is "damning," and by itself sufficient to "totally undermine" Joseph's claim to be a translator. Notice too that the closest Runnells comes to actually defining *translate* is when he complains that according to unnamed "unofficial apologists" the word "translate doesn't really mean translate."¹¹ This would be a good place to explain what the word means in the context of what Joseph Smith actually did.

[Page 184]We need to do a bit of eye checking here. What does it mean to translate? Runnells implies a circular definition in which *translate* should mean "translate," which, if you actually stop to think about it, does not help much. Nor does it demonstrate any degree of introspection, self-reflection, or even inquiry. The 1828 Webster's Dictionary¹² offers this, which actually helps a great deal.

TRANSLATE, verb transitive [Latin *translatus*, from *transfero*; *trans*, over, and *fero*, to bear.]

1. To bear, carry or remove from one place to another. It is applied to the removal of a bishop from one see to another.

The bishop of Rochester, when the king would have translated him to a better bishoprick, refused.

2. To remove or convey to heaven, as a human being, without death.

By faith Enoch was translated, that he should not see death. Hebrews 11:15.

3. To transfer; to convey from one to another. 2 Samuel 3:10.

4. To cause to remove from one part of the body to another; as, to translate a disease.

5. To change.

Happy is your grace,

That can translate the stubbornness of fortune

Into so quiet and so sweet a style.

[Page 185]6. To interpret; to render into another language; to express the sense of one language in the words of another.

The Old Testament was translated into the Greek language more than two hundred years before Christ. The Scriptures are now translated into most of the languages of Europe and Asia.

7. To explain.

Here, a single word—*translate*—has several definitions. I notice that the word *perfect* does not appear anywhere in this definition of translate. Nor does even the sixth definition of *translate* say that expressing “the sense of one language in the words of another” requires that existing successful translations, with or without italicized explanatory words, should or must be completely ignored. To succeed in its purpose, a translation need not be completely original or unique or flawless.

Does Runnells provide any real-world examples or evidence of inspired translations, or transmitted scripture that demonstrates the validity of his opening complaint about what I see as a minor, cosmetic aspect of the Book of Mormon translation? Are any of his complaints about Joseph Smith accompanied by any demonstration of how actual prophets have behaved or should behave? Does he have evidence that translation from ancient languages to a modern high language is more successful when it completely ignores existing translations of the same or related material? Does the New Testament demonstrate utter perfection in quoting the Old Testament or does it contain Septuagint errors? Does the King James Translation utterly ignore the earlier Tyndale translation? Would there be any advantage in ignoring existing translations of the same material? Would a use of a well-known, existing translation impede readers in the task of coming to recognize [Page 186]and comprehend what they encounter? Do the practical issues in the translation and transmission of writing from one culture to another through any human-involved means suggest that perfect translation is even possible? Does the Bible display this theoretical perfection either in its internal quotations, different accounts of the same events, or in the manuscript history or in the different translations? And, if Joseph was perpetuating a fraud, does it make sense that he would plagiarize the one source his readers were sure to recognize and regard with some heightened value?

For all these questions, the answer is no. But Runnells neither asks nor answers them. Does this save trouble, or cause it?

On Prophets and Translations

Runnells complains about Joseph Smith as a prophet, but he never bothers to define what a prophet should be, and therefore, he does not inquire into what we should expect from one. Based on the arguments he offers his implicit definition is that prophets ought to be perfect, God’s sock-puppets, and never ought to do or say or permit anything that violate Runnell’s own unexamined expectations from what he learned by attending Sacrament Meetings. For my part, I did spend considerable time figuring out what I should expect, and in the process I discovered twenty-eight Biblical tests for discerning true and false prophets.¹³ I find that they set my expectations in a very different way. For example:

We are men of like passions with you. (Acts 14:15)

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. (1 John 1:8)

[Page 187]How does Joseph Smith himself set our expectations both for himself and for his translation?

I told them I was but a man, and they must not expect me to be perfect; if they expected perfection from me, I should expect it from them; but if they would bear with my infirmities and the infirmities of the brethren, I would likewise bear with their infirmities.¹⁴

In discussing a passage in Malachi, Joseph Smith comments that “I might have rendered a plainer translation to this, but it is sufficiently plain to suit my purposes as it stands.” (D&C 128:18). In D&C 1 as part of a formal statement of “the authority of my servants” (v. 6) God declares that the revelations “were given unto my servants in their weakness, after the manner of their language, that they might come to understanding. And inasmuch as they erred, it might be made known.” (D&C 1:24–25). Notice that this formal statement of the “authority of my servants” describes the Church as in process, not as a stasis.

These passages introduce a different expectation, one that actually gives evidence of Joseph's robust, tolerant, and open-ended attitude about himself and his own translations and revelations, which he felt free to edit. If a prophet can accomplish what is "expedient," a word that appears many times in the Doctrine and Covenants, he can serve God's purposes, which according to Isaiah 55:8–11, are concerned with long-term processes. If a translation is good enough, sufficient, it does not have to be perfect. If a translation is imperfect, then there is nothing wrong with improving it later.

If we consider Joseph Smith's productions against the real-world examples of purportedly scriptural texts, we have the advantage of building our expectations upon a solid foundation, rather than airy supposition. John Welch in *Illuminating the [Page 188] Sermon at the Temple and the Sermon on the Mount* discusses several related translation issues.

Hugh Nibley has suggested several other reasons that made the use of King James style important, if not necessary. One reason was Joseph's audience: "When Jesus and the Apostles and, for that matter, the Angel Gabriel quote the [Hebrew] scriptures in the New Testament, do they recite from some mysterious Urtext? Do they quote the prophets of old in the ultimate original? ... No, they do not. They quote the Septuagint, a Greek version of the Old Testament prepared in the third century B.C. Why so? Because that happened to be the received standard version of the Bible accepted by the readers of the Greek New Testament."

Another reason for the use of the style of the King James Version was the nature of the record: "The scriptures were probably in old-fashioned language the day they were written down." Furthermore, "by frankly using that idiom, the Book of Mormon avoids the necessity of having to be redone into 'modern English' every thirty or forty years." To such points, other explanations may be added, but the foregoing seem sufficient. The King James idiom yields a good translation of both the Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon at the Temple. In fact, a study of the Greek vocabulary used in Matthew 5–7 will show that in most cases, the traditional English translation is rather straightforward. The syntax of most of the sentences is relatively simple, the expressions are direct, and most of the words and phrases have obvious and adequate primary choices in English as their translation [Page 189](although their meaning and implications still remain profound). ¹⁵

If I approach Joseph's translations with a view to finding evidence of real inspiration, rather than perfection, my attention will move in different directions. I might end up noticing and valuing this discussion by Welch in his next chapter.

In one important passage, manuscript evidence favors the Sermon at the Temple, and it deserves recognition. The KJV of Matthew 5:22 reads, "Whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause [eikei] shall be in danger of the judgment" (italics added). The Sermon at the Temple drops the phrase without a cause (3 Nephi 12:22). So do many of the better early manuscripts.

This favorable evidence for the Sermon at the Temple has the support of reliable sources. While lacking unanimous consensus in the early manuscripts of the Sermon on the Mount (which is not unusual), the [Page 190]absence of the phrase "without a cause" is evidenced by the following manuscripts: p64, p67, Sinaiticus (original hand), Vaticanus, some minuscules, the Latin Vulgate (Jerome mentions that it was not found in the oldest manuscripts known to him), the Ethiopic texts, the Gospel of the Nazarenes, Justin, Tertullian, Origen, and others. One may count as compelling all readings that are supported by "the best Greek MSS—by the 200 ce p64 (where it is extant) and by at least the two oldest uncials, as well as some minuscules, [especially if] it also has some Latin, Syriac, Coptic, and early patristic support." A survey of the list of manuscripts supporting the Sermon at the Temple and the original absence of the phrase without a cause in Matthew 5:22 shows that this shorter reading meets these criteria.

Moreover, this textual difference in the Greek manuscripts of the Sermon on the Mount is the only variant that has a significant impact on meaning. It is much more severe to say, “Whoever is angry is in danger of the judgment,” than to say, “Whoever is angry without a cause is in danger of the judgment.” The first discourages all anger against a brother; the second permits brotherly anger as long as it is justifiable. The former is more like the demanding sayings of Jesus regarding committing adultery in one’s heart (see Matthew 5:28) and loving one’s enemies (see Matthew 5:44), neither of which offers the disciple a convenient loophole of self-justification or rationalization. Indeed, as Wernberg-Møller points out, the word *eikei* in Matthew 5:22 may reflect a Semitic idiom that does not invite allowance for “‘just’ anger in certain circumstances” at all, but “is original and echoes some Aramaic phrase, condemning anger as sinful in any case” and “as alluding to . . . the harboring of angry feelings for any length of time.” In light of Wernberg-Møller’s interpretation of the underlying idiom, the original sense of Matthew 5:22 is accurately reflected in the Sermon at the Temple whether *eikei* is included in the Greek saying or not.

In my estimation, this textual variant in favor of the Sermon at the Temple is very meaningful. The removal of without a cause has important moral, behavioral, psychological, and religious ramifications, as it is the [Page 191]main place where a significant textual change from the KJV was in fact needed and delivered.¹⁶

Welch discusses some King James errors repeated in 3 Nephi but does so without scandal because, quite frankly, none of them change the meaning significantly. And the larger context of 3 Nephi 8-29 demonstrates remarkable inspiration in disclosing the temple background of the Sermon on the Mount. Welch’s approach was impressive enough that a non-LDS press published his work as applied to the Sermon in Matthew.¹⁷ Welch does not ignore the errors, but he doesn’t grant them the decisive status or sole focus that Runnells does. Plus Welch makes several observations that support the Joseph Smith claims of having provided an inspired translation, which need not be a perfect translation, nor oblige the reader to bring infallible perception and comprehension to their reading.

Several LDS writers have closely examined Joseph Smith’s translations, including John Tvedtnes, Royal Skousen, John Welch, Ben McGuire, and Brant Gardner. They have highlighted important information worth careful consideration. Runnells does not so much as mention the existence of their findings. It is not *ad hominem* to observe that Runnells treats a few King James errors as “damning” and “totally undermining” Joseph’s claims regarding a translation. He has decided that such apparent imperfections as he presents are, by themselves, decisively important. He completely ignores all LDS scholarship that gives any evidence suggesting authentic translation.

Think about why. Where is there any manuscript evidence that demonstrates in practice, and not just in theory, that when God is involved to some degree in the transmission and translation of a sacred text, we can know this because all [Page 192]known manuscripts and transmissions are completely perfect, error free, never dependent on any previous translations, and are always mutually consistent without any variation or editing whatsoever? Does Runnells provide any hard evidence to back up the theory? For that matter, is there any such evidence that he could have offered if he tried? Anywhere? It also turns out that had he paused long enough to clearly state that his argument depends entirely on these unstated conditions that he would also open them to critical examination. And that would not do. Who wants to publish a web document declaring that “Joseph Smith and various unofficial apologists have failed to live up to my completely unrealistic expectations.”

The New Testament itself provides examples of how Jesus and his apostles and the occasional angel all quote the commonly used Septuagint, variants, errors, and all. As Nibley and Welch and others have pointed out, Joseph Smith’s modes and means of translation have ample biblical precedent.

As Thomas Kuhn says, “In short, consciously or not, the decision to employ a particular piece of apparatus and to use it in a particular way carries an assumption that only certain sorts of circumstances will arise.”¹⁸ What if the circumstances you are testing for are completely unfounded? What if, as Jesus says, the problem is the beam in your own eye? What if the experiment is poorly designed, due to unrealistic expectations? What if the focus on

flaws-as-decisive has the effect of distracting a person from far more fruitful investigations and evidence?

Texts and Contexts

Consider Runnell's point 11, claiming that "The Book of Mormon taught and still teaches a Trinitarian view of the Godhead."¹⁹ He cites the four Book of Mormon passages with [Page 193]changes in the 1837 edition, the adding of "Son of" which he claims were "major changes" done to accommodate an "evolved view of the Godhead" away from what Runnells claims is an original Trinitarianism. Here are two of his examples.

1 Nephi 11:18 (current versification)

And he said unto me, Behold, the virgin whom thou seest, is the mother of [the son of] God, after the manner of the flesh.

1 Nephi 11:21.

And the angel said unto me: Behold the Lamb of God, yea, even [the Son of] the Eternal Father!

He cites another handful of verses claiming that they represent passages that still "hold a Trinitarian view of the Godhead." For instance, Ether 3:14:

Behold, I am he who was prepared from the foundation of the world to redeem my people. Behold, I am Jesus Christ. I am the Father and the Son. In me shall all mankind have life, and that eternally, even they who shall believe on my name; and they shall become my sons and my daughters.

A Book of Mormon passage that Runnells does not cite is 2 Nephi 25:5 which explains that "there is none other people that understand the things which were spoken unto the Jews like unto them, save it be that they are taught after the manner of the things of the Jews."

This is actually a valid general principle that there may be differences in the comprehension of cultural outsiders and cultural insiders. Sometimes the words that mean one thing within one culture may mean something else to outsiders. For example, here are two true statements. *I've lived near Pittsburgh for over nine years. I once attended a professional football game.* Can you picture the game? Does your cultural background [Page 194]permit you to imagine Three Rivers Stadium and the Pittsburgh Steelers? If so, you imagine wrongly. Let me add a bit more context, another true statement. *When I lived in Liverpool England, I once attended a professional football game.* A bit more context, an awareness of the relevant cultural difference, and the same phrase, "professional football game" calls forth a completely different set of rules, ball, equipment, and style of play. If context can so drastically change the meaning of a phrase like "professional football game," how about context for "I am the Father and the Son?"

Take the same Book of Mormon proof-texts that Runnells complains about in his essay, and try reading them in the wider contexts involved: the source context rooted in Jerusalem 600 bce, a broader sampling of Book of Mormon passages, and the translation context in Joseph Smith's Palmyra, Harmony and Kirtland.

In *The Great Angel: A Study of Israel's Second God*, Margaret Barker explains that in "the Bible, there are those called the sons of El Elyon, sons of El or Elohim, all clearly heavenly beings, and there are those called sons of Yahweh or the Holy One who are human. This distinction is important for at least two reasons: Yahweh was one of the sons of El Elyon;²⁰ and Jesus in the Gospels was described as a Son of El Elyon, God Most High ... Jesus is not called the son of Yahweh nor the son of the Lord, but he is called Lord."²¹

[Page 195]Notice that in the Book of Mormon, during Nephi's vision, the angel says, "Blessed art thou, Nephi,

because thou believest in the Son of the most high God.” (1 Nephi 11:6). The Book of Mormon takes me into First Temple Judaism, back to 600 bce, Lehi’s day.²² This passage occurs in the same chapter as two of the verses that Runnells uses as proof texts for his arguments, and therefore, provides context that his proof-text reading neglects.

Runnells had complained about the verse with the change regarding the virgin as “the mother of [the son] of God.”²³ The Book of Mormon clearly identifies Jesus as the son of God Most High. If we understand that the God of the Old Testament is Yahweh, son of El Elyon, then the added “son of” is just clarification, explanation for readers in 1837, not a theological change. Jesus has a Father in Heaven who testifies of him, and to whom he prays and reports. In the Book of Mormon, Jesus identifies himself as Yahweh, the lord of the Old Testament, declaring that “I am he that gave the law, and I am he that covenanted with my people Israel,” (3 Nephi 15:5). In Benjamin’s discourse those who covenant with Jesus/Yahweh become “the children of Christ, his sons, and his daughters.” (Mosiah 5:7. Compare 3 Nephi 9:17). So Jesus both has a father who bears witness of him (3 Nephi 11:7) and to whom he prays (3 Nephi 17:14) and is a father via covenant and creation, and therefore is both a father and a son, both God (Yahweh), and a Son of God (a son of *El Elyon*, God Most High). Because I am both a father and a son, I don’t find this a difficult concept. It is simply a matter of paying attention to context to understand when and how and why a particular title and role applies.

[Page 196]The Aramaic translations (or commentaries) of the Old Testament are called Targums and are notable for containing, in many instances, explanatory material not included in the Hebrew, but helpful for explaining the best way to understand key passages, at least by those who created that translation. And as the 1828 Webster’s definition pointed out, “explain” is a valid meaning of *translate*. (A translation that cannot be understood properly is not much of a translation.) So we have both conspicuous examples of explanation being part of a legitimate translation in the Targums, and a definition of *translate* contemporary with Joseph Smith that includes explanation. In these two particular verses from 1 Nephi, I think adding “the son of” to the phrase “the mother of God” does not actually change the meaning, if you know the context—if you know that Jesus/Yahweh is God in the Old Testament, and also Son of the Most High God. The change was apparently done to appease the discomfort that those LDS of Protestant cultural heritage have felt with seemingly Catholic concepts. If you know the correct cultural context, the change was not necessary. But 19th century readers did not have the same access to that pre-exilic cultural context. Adding “the son of” to “the Lamb of God, the Eternal Father” in 1 Nephi 11:21 is, I think, a mistake, but not a serious one because it doesn’t change the theology. Jesus as the Lamb/Servant of God, the Eternal Father is accurate because Jesus/Yahweh has roles as Eternal Father by way of a covenant relationship with humans, as the passages in Mosiah and 3 Nephi demonstrate. Jesus/Yahweh also has an Eternal Father, as his own prayers²⁴ and teachings²⁵ and the testifying voice²⁶ demonstrate. This is a distinction that doesn’t really make a difference theologically, though it may do so referentially. But El Elyon’s Fatherhood is not removed or compromised by [Page 197]recognizing Yahweh’s and vice versa. It is just a matter of us bringing the best context to our reading.

Runnells quotes from a letter published in *Dialogue* in which Boyd Kirkland argued that Mormonism has “An Evolving God.” “The Book of Mormon and early revelations of Joseph Smith do indeed vividly portray a picture of the Father and Son as the same God ... why is it that the Book of Mormon not only doesn’t clear up questions about the Godhead which have raged in Christianity for centuries, but on the contrary just adds to the confusion?”²⁷

I had read Kirkland’s earlier essays on the topic in the 1980s and was impressed. Then in 1999, I read *The Great Angel*, which radically changed my understanding of the Jerusalem 600 bce context and my approach to the Book of Mormon.²⁸ Plus, in 2001 I read Bruening and Paulson’s detailed essay, “The Development of the Mormon Understanding of God: Early Mormon Modalism and Other Myths.” In surveying a range of earlier scholarship, including Kirkland’s, they observe that “most proponents of this developmental theory make the same claims and use the same proof texts.”²⁹ Bruening and Paulson provide a far more detailed survey of the Book of Mormon than do these earlier writers, including Kirkland. They go beyond the usual proof-texts to provide a wider and far more telling context in support of Joseph Smith’s direct statement that “I have always and in all congregations when I have preached on the subject of the Deity, it has been the plurality of Gods. It has been preached by the Elders for fifteen years. I have always [Page 198]declared God to be a distinct personage, Jesus Christ a separate and distinct personage from God the Father, and that the Holy Ghost was a distinct personage and a Spirit: and these three

constitute three distinct personages and three Gods.”³⁰ [_](#)

Runnells claims that “many verses still in the Book of Mormon ... hold a Trinitarian view of the Godhead.” Please keep in mind that for Runnells’s complaints to make sense, we have to assume that he is talking about a conventional creedal metaphysical Trinity which postdates the New Testament. But it helps to remember that a social Trinity is still a Trinity, since the word merely means three. The issue is whether a close contextual reading of the Book of Mormon leads to a metaphysical Trinity, or to a social Trinity. I have found that contextualizing is a much better approach than reading passages of ancient scripture in isolation, and interpreting them against what usually turns out to be anachronistic assumptions.

Runnells starts with Alma 11:38-39 and the exchange between Amulek and Zeezrom: “Now Zeezrom saith again unto him: Is the Son of God the very Eternal Father? And Amulek said unto him: Yea, he is the very Eternal Father of heaven and of earth, and all things which in them are; he is the beginning and the end, the first and the last.” In responding to Zeezrom, Amulek goes on to provide much more useful context. For example, in verses 39-40, he equates the Son of God with the Eternal Father of Heaven and Earth, the beginning and the end, the first and the last, the one who “shall come into the world to redeem his people,” to “take upon him the transgressions of those who believe on his name.” As a reader who knows about First Temple theology, and who considers many other important Book of Mormon passages that Runnells does not address, I know that Yahweh, God of the Old Testament, is a Son of *El Elyon*, God Most High, and that Yahweh/Jesus [Page 199] becomes the father of humans who covenant with him. Yahweh is the creator of the earth. In light of the different context I bring to the same passages that Runnells cites, I don’t have the same problems he does.

In verse 44, Amulek refers to “the bar of Christ the Son, and God the Father, and the Holy Spirit, which is one Eternal God.” Later in the scenes of the resurrected Lord at the Temple, the prayer for oneness in 3 Nephi 19:23, 29 provide useful insights on what it means to be “one.” So does John 16:22, where Jesus prays that the apostles may be “one even as we are one.” That is, the “oneness” that Jesus asks the apostles to have is modeled by the oneness that Jesus has with his father, *El Elyon*. The menorah is a key here, one vine with branches, seven lights connected to operate as one. This makes for a social Trinity, not a metaphysical Trinity.

In the next chapter, Alma joins in, referring in verse 31 to the story of the Fall, with Adam and Eve “becoming as Gods, knowing good from evil.” Notice the implied plurality of Gods, something that a social trinity permits and is consistent with Barker’s temple theology. In verse 33, Alma refers to God calling upon men in the name of His Son, and having mercy through “mine Only Begotten Son.” And chapter 13 includes, among other things, mentions of the Holy Ghost, Holy Spirit. So we have three divine beings who act in unity as “one Eternal God.”

Earlier, 1 Nephi 11:6 has an angel commending Nephi for his belief in “the Son of the Most High God.” Since Most High in Hebrew is *El Elyon*, and the Dead Sea Scrolls version of Deuteronomy 32:8–9 identifies Yahweh as a son of *El Elyon*, we have more helpful context. In the Book of Mormon, therefore, Jesus is God of the Old Testament, who gave the law to Moses, part of a social Trinity that is “one God.” Jehovah has a Father, *El Elyon*, God Most High, that bears witness of Him and to whom He prays. Christ is a father to human via covenant [Page 200] and therefore, “because of the covenant ye have made ye shall be called the Children of Christ, his sons and daughters: for behold this day hath he spiritually begotten you.” (Mosiah 5:7). Two Book of Mormon passages refer to “the Name of the Most High God.” (3 Nephi 4:32, and 3 Nephi 11:17.) Interestingly Margaret Barker explains, “Older texts suggest that before the reform [of Josiah] the Name has been simply a synonym for the presence of Yahweh.”³¹ [_](#) Further along she discusses later texts that suggest that “‘the Name’ was a separate being rather than just a name in our sense of the word, and that the Name was that aspect of God which could be perceived and known. The Name in its visible aspect is the Son.”³² [_](#)

Contextualizing properly costs some extra effort, but usually turns out to simplify issues in the long run. It’s like Nibley said, “Things that appear unlikely, impossible from one point of view often make perfectly good sense from another.”³³ [_](#) So the point of view we adopt is crucial. Of her own approach, Margaret Barker explains, “I favour the use of context materials rather than the currently fashionable approaches such as social scientific or rhetorical studies. I believe that a careful use of the historical critical method is most useful, as it enables us to stand where they stood, look where they looked and even to read what they wrote. What we find is not always expected or even

welcome. There have been several times in my own research and writing when I have been forced to abandon the very position I was trying to establish, and with it a great deal of my personal baggage, but this has always led to something even more exciting.”³⁴

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Information, Focus, Perception, and Neglect

More Kuhn:

Led by a new paradigm, scientists adopt new instruments and look in new places. Even more important, during revolutions, scientists see new and different things when looking with familiar instruments in places they have looked before.³⁵

Led by the paradigms defined by the example of Biblical translation and transmission, LDS scholars have examined many aspects of the Book of Mormon that make no appearance whatsoever in Runnells’s letter. As I read through the *Letter to the CES director*, I notice that I have seen a great deal of evidence and argument that does not enter on the balance scale. Say, for example *Mormon’s Codex, An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon*, or Gardner’s *Second Witness* commentaries, or *Glimpses of Lehi’s Jerusalem*, or *In the Footsteps of Lehi*, or interesting parallels between Abraham Apocrypha and our Book of Abraham,³⁶ or even mention of the significance of the raised leg on the figure on the lion couch,³⁷ or the recently discovered papyrus that shows a similar lion couch scene and has Abraham’s name.³⁸ While complaining about the Roberts’s *Study and View of the Hebrews*, he does not mention Welch’s 1984 paper called “Answering B. H. Roberts’s Questions and An ‘Unparallel.’” I read all three thirty years ago and did not have nearly the trouble that Runnells displays. He also describes the recent claims about *The Late War Between the United States* [Page 202] and *Great Britain*. This is a 1819 textbook written in King James Version style language for New York state school children, “one of them very likely being Joseph Smith.”³⁹ I must mention Ben McGuire’s perceptive response to claims about *The Late War*⁴⁰ as well as a proper methodology for dealing with parallels, which he prepared in response to Rick Grunder, who happens to be one of Runnell’s sources.⁴¹

Does the obvious neglect of important sources and the impatience that Runnell’s displays matter? On the website response to FairMormon, Runnells says this: “I believe that members and investigators deserve all of the information on the table to be able to make a fully informed and balanced decision as to whether or not they want to commit their hearts, minds, time, talents, income, and lives to Mormonism.”⁴² “All of the information on the table” is rather a large order. What it actually means is we all deserve “God-Like Omniscience” as a basic human right, to be provided by institutional authorities before students and investigators make any serious decision or commitment. This demand for absolute certainty and omniscience as a gift to students before they make any faith [Page 203] decision would, by its nature, rule out the possibility of any faith decision being made. Faith decisions, by definition, are based on incomplete knowledge.

Think about it. Where exactly can we go to get that basic right of pre-digested, spoon-fed omniscience on demand fulfilled now? Does Runnells himself come even remotely close to measuring up to the standard of what he demands from even the CES or FairMormon? Does he come close to putting “all of the information on the table” in even one of the topics he treats?⁴³ Is there a single page of his essay that could even remotely be described as “fully informed and balanced” with respect to any topic that he treats? He does not put any favorable information on the table concerning the Book of Mormon or the Book of Abraham.

I have been making serious inquiries into controversial issues since 1974. Having had many more years to play in these fields, I know when Runnells is not telling me something important. And I understand how background assumptions shape his reactions to the information he does select to emphasize. Even so, I don’t think that he is being intentionally deceptive, or betraying my trust. And my experience has been that those less-than-omniscient Sunday School teachers and manual writers, or whomever, who did not tell him about those sources and details,

probably did not know either. It's just people being people as I have learned to expect them to behave, doing the best that they could, according to their lights and given their resources, rather than certifiably omniscient people violating a sacred trust by withholding information.

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Absolutes and Sliding Scales

Look at his complaints about the various First Vision Accounts and the priesthood restoration. On page 22 of his *Letter*, Runnells claims that “there is absolutely no record of a First Vision prior to 1832.”⁴⁴ The FairMormon website response points out an article in the *Palmyra Reflector* from 1831 that indicates discussion of Joseph’s vision as early as November 1830. They also point to the allusion in D&C 20, which dates to April 1830.⁴⁵ Notice that in his response to FairMormon, Runnells shifts the argument regarding the First Vision from “absolutely no record” to “this actually confirms the point I’m making in that the first vision was unknown to the Saints and the world before 1832. In fact, most of the Saints were unaware of a first vision until it was published in 1842.” But of course, *that was not the point he was making*. “Absolutely no record” is the point he was making. His response swaps in a very different claim, one much easier to defend.

In his online response Runnells even brings in several accounts of visions reported by contemporaries of Joseph Smith, as though such accounts somehow negate his.⁴⁶ Yet according to D&C 1, such things are to be expected. Where D&C 1:17 describes the call of Joseph Smith, the very next verse matter-of-factly asserts that the Lord “also gave commandments” to [Page 205]unspecified “others that they should proclaim these things to the world.” Far from claiming exclusive truth and revelation for the LDS, D&C 1:34 declares that “I the Lord am willing to make these things known unto all flesh.”

Runnells, like Grant Palmer before him,⁴⁷ refers to Joseph Smith’s 1832 history to complain about the First Vision, and like Palmer, he ignores the first paragraph in making claims about a late appearance of the priesthood restoration stories. I have bolded a key passage:

A History of the life of Joseph Smith jr. an account of his marvilous experience and of all the mighty acts which he doeth in the name of Jesus Ch[r]ist the son of the living God of whom he beareth record and also an account of the rise of the church of Christ in the eve of time according as the Lord brought forth and established by his hand firstly he receiving the testamony from on high secondly the ministering of Aangels **thirdly the reception of the holy Priesthood by the ministring of Aangels to adminster the letter of the Gospel the Law and commandments as they were given unto him and the ordinenc[e]s, fo[u]rthly a confirmation and reception of the high Priesthood after the holy order of the son of the living God** power and ordinance from on high to preach the Gospel in the administration and demonstration of the spirit the Kees of the Kingdom of god confereed upon him and the continuation of the blessings of God to him &c ⁴⁸

[Page 206]In his original *Letter*, Runnells says, “Although the priesthood is now taught to have been restored in 1829, Joseph and Oliver made no such claim until 1834.”⁴⁹ He uncritically repeats Palmer’s claims about an 1834 date and leaves this crucially important information from 1832 off the table. When FairMormon points out the 1832 account, he labors to devalue the significance of this passage, and of other earlier sources that FairMormon mentions: “FAIR’s above answer actually confirms my point that the general Church membership was unfamiliar with the now official story of the Priesthood restoration until 1834. The best FAIR can do after scouring through everything for their rebuttal is this?”⁵⁰

Notice again *the shift from an original argument* against the priesthood restoration based on “no such claim until 1834” to a much softer complaint about the general membership being “unfamiliar with the now official story.” Since the official story comes from the 1838 account, the fact that the general membership may not have been familiar with all details should only demonstrate the obvious. On the other hand, it may be that the people who

were familiar with the now official story simply did not write it down. It should also be obvious that the Book of Mormon is very clear about the need for priesthood authority, and that provides important context for the other earlier priesthood restoration documents, as well as consistency with what became the official accounts. Runnells also overlooks the important essays in the 2005 volume, *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844*, which includes “Seventy Contemporaneous Priesthood Restoration Documents.” Several of these accounts also predate Palmer’s claim about an 1834 invention.

[Page 207]We also have the unaddressed issue of precedent in the way God would or would not do things: “And as they came down from the mountain [of Transfiguration] Jesus charged them, saying, Tell the vision to no man, until the Son of man be risen again from the dead” (Matthew 18:9). History tells us that very often, people who have profound religious experiences do not immediately report them or even write them down. At least, history tells those who investigate.

Archeological Expectations and the Direction of Subsequent Investigation

On page 8, Runnells makes a few complaints about the state of Book of Mormon evidence. I find the way that he establishes his own paradigm to be revealing. He complains about an utter lack of archeological evidence for Nephite civilization around the New York Cumorah. But is he looking in the right place? And is he looking for the right things? If he is looking for the wrong things in the wrong places, then his failure to find any evidence is inevitable rather than shocking.

He objects to “unofficial” apologists⁵¹ claims that the Book of Mormon Cumorah is located in Mesoamerica, and claims that they have done this in response to this lack of archeological evidence at the New York drumlin. In truth, it was close reading of the text that has turned informed Mormon scholars towards [Page 208]Mesoamerica. See, for instance, Sidney Sperry’s personal account of what changed his mind.⁵² David Palmer’s *In Search of Cumorah* is another example of the same notion but with further refinement of the process.⁵³ Rather than uncritically accept what early LDS thought, a few people started reading more carefully. It is a matter of historical record that the first serious attempt to create an internal map, based solely on a comprehensive look at the Book of Mormon text appeared in 1937.⁵⁴ This means that opinions before that date were not, and could not be based on the eyewitness descriptions provided in the text, but on uncritical supposition. The record shows clearly that when LDS scholars began to read the Book of Mormon closely they realized that the description of the hill did not actually fit the New York location. And if not, where did the description fit? Only when a fitting location can be found can we have any confidence that we are looking in the right place. And once you have the right location, what should a person expect to find?

Runnells sets out his own expectations of what he expects to find around the New York Cumorah.

Compare this to the Roman occupation of Britain and other countries. There are abundant evidences of their presence during the first 400 years ce such as villas, mosaic floors, public baths, armor, weapons, writings, art, pottery and so on. Even the major road systems used today in some of these occupied countries were built by the Romans. Additionally, there is ample evidence of the Mayan and Aztec civilizations as well [Page 209]as a civilization in current day Texas that dates back 15,000 years. Where are the Nephite or Lamanite buildings, roads, armors, swords, pottery, art, etc.?⁵⁵

Asking “where are the Nephite and Lamanite buildings” is a very good question, if you actually ask it first of the Book of Mormon textual requirements and then fit that description to an appropriate physical and cultural context. And then go ahead with realistic expectations of both material culture and the limits of archeology at any given time. However, if I’m standing atop Pendle Hill in Lancashire, England, asking “where are the Nephite and Lamanite buildings?” everyone would admit that it is a remarkably poor question. Runnells asks of a location that does not fit the descriptions in the text,⁵⁶ and he also expects that at that location Lehi’s little family group should

affect New World architectural styles after the manner of a Roman invasion force that entered Britain.

Think for a moment exactly the circumstances under which Lehi's family arrived in the New World in around 590 bce compared to Runnells's model of the Roman conquest of Britain. The Romans came to stay in 43 ce, and made Britain a province until 410. The Romans sent several legions, kept a constant military presence, provided ongoing population and administrative influx, as well as trade across the English channel from other, nearby, Roman-controlled territories. How well does that model of a well-supported, well-supplied invasion involving many thousands of soldiers and government officials in continuous contact with Rome over 300 years apply to Lehi's arrival in a single isolated ship?

Archeological surveys demonstrate that when Lehi arrived, it would have been to a location with pre-existing populations, [Page 210]at that time consisting of small villages and hamlets.⁵⁷ In the Book of Mormon a ship arrives in a New World location with perhaps 15 adults and 25 children.⁵⁸ So here we have a picture of a small group arriving into an unfamiliar, already populated area. (Matt Roper's "Nephi's Neighbors" is essential reading on this topic.⁵⁹) The locals have their own language, knowledge of local crops and other resources, which would be essential information for the new arrivals who would be foolish not to adopt working local practices. Archeologically, therefore, we should assume the newcomers would look very much like the locals because they would adopt their material culture.⁶⁰ Over a decade ago, Brant Gardner talked about the difference this makes in expectations and consequent perceptions:

Would I ever reconstruct Mesoamerican society in a way that appeared to represent Christianized Old World peoples? No. I wouldn't. I don't.

The rather interesting discovery made just a few years back was that I, and many other Mesoamericanists, had simply made some incorrect assumptions about the [Book of Mormon] text. The attempts of LDS archaeological apologetics was for years focused on [Page 211]finding the Christian or the Hebrew—or who knows what—in Mesoamerican archaeology.

The difference came when I started looking for Mesoamerica in the Book of Mormon instead of the Book of Mormon in Mesoamerica. Oddly enough, there is a huge difference, and the nature and the quality of the correlations has changed with that single shift in perspective....

When I started my examination, I had no expectation of what I would find. Some of the correlation I have found came not from attempting to find some specific thing, but in realizing that the text did not say what I had thought it said—and that it really didn't make any sense until I saw it in the context of Mesoamerican culture.

When people ask me about the most important correlation I have found, I have a hard time narrowing it to just one. The most important correlation isn't a singular finding; rather, it can be seen in the many facets of the discovery that the entire text of the Book of Mormon works better in a Mesoamerican context. Speeches suddenly have a context that makes them relevant instead of just preachy. The pressures leading to wars are understandable. The wars themselves have an explanation for their peculiar features. All of these things happen within a single interpretive framework that puts them in the right place at the right time.⁶¹

[Page 212]That Runnells can even imagine that his Roman Britain comparison makes any kind of sense tells me a great deal about why he is disappointed. From my perspective he is looking for the wrong things in the wrong place. He is not particularly self-reflective about the situation.

With regards to the New York hill, it is fairly easy for Runnells or anyone to cite LDS authorities who confidently proclaim that the New York hill is the same as the hill described in the Book of Mormon. It is far more difficult to find any of them who accompany their assertion with a close reading of the Book of Mormon passages that

describe the hill and its environs. What the historical record shows is that once the association between the Book of Mormon hill and the New York hill was made (not by Joseph Smith), almost no one thought to question it. Those that started asking the questions did so because they got around to a close and careful reading the Book of Mormon descriptions and tried to account for what it provides. Runnells himself demonstrates exactly how the neglectful approach works:

This is in direct contradiction to what Joseph Smith and other prophets have taught. Never mind that the Church has a visitor's center there in New York and holds annual Hill Cumorah pageants.⁶²

Notice that Runnells completely ignores what Mormon and Moroni provide as eyewitness descriptions. He makes an argument based on authority that totally ignores the two most significant eyewitness authorities. The New York hill is an important historical site for the LDS, so the fact of a visitor's center there having significance is not as much an argument as an unexamined assertion that some irrefutable argument must be there somewhere. And he also assumes that those other [Page 213]prophets and authorities who made the identification must know what they are talking about, because, as we all know prophets should be basically the sock puppets of an Omniscient God who never allows them to do or say or think anything without His approval and consent.⁶³ But don't Mormon and Moroni, the editors of the Book of Mormon text, and eyewitnesses to the events at Cumorah, count as authorities worth considering? Does Runnells, or any of the authorities he cites (or more often infers without actually citing) in support of the New York hill as Cumorah, account for the whole of what Mormon and Moroni provide?

Concerning otherwise faithful disciples who assume that they understand, and therefore, do not even think to ask, Jesus makes an important point:

And now because of stiff-neckedness and unbelief, they understood not my word: therefore I was commanded to say no more of the Father concerning this thing unto them [being the Old World disciples].... And they understood me not, for they supposed ... (3 Nephi 15:18, 22).

An important, recurring theme in Jesus' preaching concerns those who have ears but do not hear, and eyes but do not see, referring to the famous comments in Isaiah 6.

In defense of his unstated, but argumentatively essential assumptions, Runnells does not recognize the single most relevant statement on the authority held by LDS leaders, from D&C 1:6, 24–28.

Behold, this is my mine authority, and the authority of my servants....

[Page 214]These commandments are of me, and were given unto my servants in their weakness, after the manner of their language, that they might come to understanding.

And inasmuch as they erred, it might be made known;

And inasmuch as they sought wisdom, they might be instructed;

And inasmuch as they sinned, they might be chastened that they might repent;

And inasmuch as they were humble they might be made strong, and blessed from on high and receive knowledge from time to time.

A large portion of the complaints that Runnells makes both in his *Letter* and his response to FairMormon works from an assumption that LDS leadership should display no weakness, have no common manner of language, never

err in their statements, never need to seek wisdom since they should already have it all on the shelf, never sin and therefore never need to repent, and have all knowledge from the start so that no one, especially not Runnells, might ever need to change their thinking on any subject, no matter how trivial, especially not after having attended EFY, read some “approved” books, and served a mission.

Science Concerns and Questions

Runnells opens with this:

The problem Mormonism encounters is that so many of its claims are well within the realm of scientific study, and as such, can be proven or disproven. To cling to faith in these areas, where the overwhelming evidence is against it, is willful ignorance, not spiritual dedication.

[Page 215]1. 2 Nephi 2:22 and Alma 12:23–24 state there was no death of any kind (humans, all animals, birds, fish, dinosaurs, etc.) on this earth until the “Fall of Adam”, which according to D&C 77:6–7 occurred 7,000 years ago. It is scientifically established there has been life and death on this planet for billions of years. How does the Church reconcile this?⁶⁴

I don’t think that the testability of Mormon claims is a problem. Indeed, Thomas Kuhn observes that “there are values to be used in judging whole theories: they must, first and foremost, permit puzzle-formulation and solutions.”⁶⁵

The tricky bit concerns the limits of verification and falsification, proving or disproving. As Ian Barbour explains, “If a deduction is not confirmed experimentally, one can never be sure which one, from among the many assumptions on which the deduction was based, was in error. A network of hypothesis and observations is always tested together. Any particular hypothesis can be maintained by rejecting or adjusting other auxiliary hypotheses.”⁶⁶

I learned long ago to pay as much attention to the networks of assumptions involved as to the observations that are then fitted into that network. For instance, where Runnells claims that the two Book of Mormon passages that he cites refers to “no death of any kind ... on this earth,” I notice that he is not quoting either passage, but paraphrasing toward his conclusion. I don’t agree with his interpretation of these verses. Few Mormons do. In my reading, the passages refer to the Garden of Eden, not the entire globe. I don’t believe that conditions in the Garden are the same as conditions outside the Garden. The Garden is a set-off place, a bounded location for two people, in which different [Page 216]conditions apply inside than outside. What is going on outside the Garden? What was going on before the Garden? We get some helpful hints from the Book of Abraham, and Nibley’s “Before Adam” talk from 1980, which was delivered at BYU, published by Deseret Book in 1986, sold in bookstores, and available online for well over a decade.⁶⁷

The setting is a cosmos in which worlds without number have been created (Moses 1:33) and destroyed many times in an ongoing process. Moses is informed that he is only to be told of the earth upon which he stands, and also that when he sees many lands on that earth, that each land is called earth, all lands having many inhabitants (Moses 1:29). Adam is “many” (Moses 1:34). We get one creation account about an earth in which the man is created last, and then we get another creation account in which the man is created upon an existing earth, and placed into a garden. The Abraham account gives the important understanding that the creative periods have no time we ought worry about, except that they take “until” (Abraham 4:18), which means take all the time you need. Regarding the process involved: “And the Gods prepared the waters that they might bring forth great whales, and every living creature that moveth” (Abraham 4:21). As Nibley observes, this is “future potential tense,”⁶⁸ initiating a process that proceeds “until” we have the great whales and other living creatures. In discussing the process, the result of which would be creatures who are obedient to a command to “bring forth ... after their kind” (Abraham 4:24), we are told that to this process “they shall be very obedient.” (Abraham 4:31). By definition “very” permits variation. So our LDS scriptures describe worlds without number, a process of creation that takes “until,” creatures are formed who are to be the end result of processes that involve [Page 217]being “very” obedient to the command to

reproduce after their kind. Elsewhere, we learn that variety gives beauty to the earth. I doubt that the geology or biology professors at BYU have the problems that Runnells has, obviously because of different observations and a different network of assumptions in the puzzle definition and testing. Nibley has also pointed out that the creation accounts are not historical treatments, but are dramatic treatments, symbolic stories performed in the temple.⁶⁹

Runnells also cites D&C 77:6-7, but given that it is a commentary on Revelation, and that Revelation is a highly symbolic document, and that “thousand” applies largely to divisions within a period designated as “temporal existence,” and that LDS leaders such as W. W. Phelps, Brigham Young, and David O. McKay have been comfortable talking about much longer spans of time, I would not recommend building too much on it.⁷⁰ In “Before Adam,” Nibley argues that:

Man is formed of the elements of the earth like any other creature, and he lives in a very lush period, a garden, which is however reduced to an oasis in an encroaching desert. (Abraham. 5:7–10.) To this limited terrain he is perfectly adapted. It is a paradise. How long does he live there? No one knows, for this was still “after the Lord’s time,” not ours. (Abraham 5:13.) It was only when he was forced out of this timeless, changeless paradise that he began to count the hours and days, moving into a hard semi-arid world of thorns, thistles, and briars, where he had to toil and sweat in the heat [Page 218]just to stay alive and lost his old intimacy with the animals. (Genesis 3:17–19.)

The questions most commonly asked are: When did it happen? How long did it take? Our texts make it very clear that we are not to measure the time and periods involved by our chronometers and calendars. Until Adam underwent that fatal change of habitat, body chemistry, diet, and psyche that went with the Fall, nothing is to be measured in our years, “for the Gods had not appointed unto Adam his reckoning.” (Abraham 5:13.) Until then, time is measured from their point of view, not ours. As far as we are concerned it can be any time, and there would be no point to insisting on this again and again if all we had to do to convert their time to our time was multiply our years by 365,000. Theirs was a different time. The only numbers we are given designated the phases of periods of creation: “and this was the second time” (Abraham 4:8), “and it was the third time” (4:13), and so on. The periods are numbered but never measured. The Gods called them “days,” but the text is at great pains to make clear that it was day and night from their point of view, when our time had not yet been appointed. “And the Gods called the light Day, and the darkness they called Night. And ... from the evening until morning they called night; ... and this was the first, or the beginning, of that which they called day and night. (Abraham 4:5.) Doctrine and Covenants 130:4-5 explains that “the reckoning of God’s time, angel’s time, prophet’s time, and man’s time [is] according to the planet on which they reside.” That implies different time schemes at least.⁷¹

[Page 219]I don’t think I need to be bound to Runnells’s readings regarding science issues. No matter how much it feeds into his network of assumptions, it doesn’t count for much in my own. He also offers complaints about a global flood, fossil evidence, and early hominids, none of which cause me any trouble because I don’t read the scriptures the same way he does.⁷² Given my network of assumptions I can handle the same observations easily, as normal and expected, not as anomalous and shocking.

Approaches to Parallels: The Late War and Others

Runnells cites the recent assertions regarding a book called *The Late War Between the United States and Great Britain*.

This was an 1819 textbook written in King James Version style language for New York state school children, one of them very likely being Joseph Smith. The first chapter alone is stunning as it reads incredibly like the Book of Mormon:

1. Now it came to pass, in the one thousand eight hundred and twelfth year of the christian era, and in the thirty and sixth year after the people of the provinces of Columbia had declared themselves a free and independent nation;

2. That in the sixth month of the same year, on the first day of the month, the chief Governor, whom the people had chosen to rule over the land of Columbia;

[Page 220]3. Even James, whose sir-name was Madison, delivered a written paper to the Great Sanhedrin (*sic*) of the people, who were assembled together.

4. And the name of the city where the people were gathered together was called after the name of the chief captain of the land of Columbia, whose fame extendeth to the uttermost parts of the earth; albeit, he had slept with his fathers ...⁷³

Since the point of *The Late War* is to imitate the style of the single most influential book in the English language, some stylistic parallels should be expected. However, there is also the matter of style versus content, surface versus substance, common place parallels versus unusual, random parallels versus convergence of connected ideas. Ben McGuire has treated these issues at length, and offers four important guidelines:⁷⁴

- Differences are as important as similarities.
- Parallels need to be examined in progressively expanding contexts.
- Parallels should be discussed in a detailed and specific fashion.
- Rhetorical values, the intentions of an author, and the purposes of a text should all to be taken into consideration.

What can happen when such guidelines are ignored, as in Runnells's case, is well illustrated by examples provided by Jeff Lindsay, in his parody essays depicting the 1829 Book [Page 221]of Mormon as plagiarizing Walt Whitman's 1856 *Leaves of Grass*,⁷⁵ and the Moon landing:⁷⁶

Numerous parallels between the history of man's voyages to the moon and the transoceanic voyages in the Book of Mormon suggest that accounts of lunar journeys may have been a primary source for Joseph Smith. Consider the following startling parallels:

- Both accounts provide detailed stories of long and dangerous journeys.
- Both accounts describe unusual compasses which were used for guidance on the journey.
- Both involved unusual ships for the journey.
- Like the astronauts of Apollo 11 and other spacecraft, the Jaredites traveled to a New World in a generally airtight vessel.
- Special high-tech lighting elements were needed for the sealed Jaredite vessels, just like the electric light sources used by the astronauts.
- In both cases, information is stored on metallic objects – brass or gold plates for the Nephites, and magnetic computer media (iron oxide disks?) for the moon voyagers.
- Both involve the discovery of a new land.
- Both involve a small group of souls departing from a proud and wicked society.
- [Page 222]Members of both groups engaged in prayer and respectful reference to God during the journey.
- Both groups expressed great gratitude upon reaching their destinations.
- The initial voyagers in both cases saw their journey as having great significance to future generations.
- Both groups brought objects from the old world to the new world they discovered.
- One group was guided by the strong arm of the Lord, while the other group was led by Neil Armstrong. Surely this is more than mere coincidence!

- Passages in both texts refer to astronomical terms such as the heavens, the stars, the earth, the moon, and the planets.
- The astronauts found the surface of the moon to be desolate, free of vegetation, and the Book of Mormon talks about the discovery of a similar land called the Land of Desolation.
- Some Book of Mormon names show striking similarity to names of objects on the moon. For example, the crater “Mairan” is quite similar to the Jaredite name “Moron” and may even be related to “Mormon.”
- The moon crater “Godin” is very similar to the Book of Mormon names “Gideon” and “Gadianton.”
- [Page 223]The moon crater “Rabbi Levi” may also account for the Jewish influences seen in the Book of Mormon.
- The Pyrenees mountain range on the moon may explain the Book of Mormon name “Pahoran.”
- The moon’s Mare Imbrium, the Sea of Rains, may account for the name “Irreantum” given to the “many waters” of the ocean by the Nephites.

Was Nephi really Neil Armstrong? Take out the “ph” from Nephi, and you’ve got the “Nei” of Neil. Was the LEM (Lunar Excursion Module) the source of the name LEMuel? Take out the central “rm” from “Mormon” and you’ve got “Moon”; take out the “r” and “i” of Moroni and you’ve got “Moon” again. Yikes—it’s all beginning to make sense!

Both McGuire and Lindsay offer many insights on dangers of uncritical parallelomania, present thoughtful recommendations for better results, and refer to a great deal of information that Runnells does not consider regarding *The Great War*, *View of the Hebrews*, and various other proposed sources for ideas leading to the Book of Mormon.

The Book of Abraham as Smoking Gun

Runnells says that:

Of all of the issues, the Book of Abraham is the issue that has both fascinated and disturbed me the most. It is the issue that I’ve spent the most time researching on because it offers a real insight into Joseph’s modus operandi as well as Joseph’s claim of being a translator. [Page 224]It is the smoking gun that has completely obliterated my testimony of Joseph Smith and his claims.⁷⁷

I find it interesting that his response for this most crucial and time-consuming issue consists of six pages, mostly involving large graphics lifted from an anti-LDS site.⁷⁸ Most of the critical information is attributed to unnamed “Egyptologists”:

Egyptologists state that Joseph Smith’s translation of the papyri and facsimiles are gibberish and have absolutely nothing to do with what the papyri and facsimiles actually are and what they actually say. Nothing in each and every facsimile is correct to what Joseph Smith claimed they said.⁷⁹

Leaving aside, for the moment, whether Joseph Smith’s Abraham is gibberish, and whether Joseph even tried to translate the *Hor Book of Breathings*, or what that text actually offers in its own right, or whether Joseph’s explanations have “absolutely nothing to do” with the facsimilies, we arrive back to the same kind of absolute claim that Runnells offered for the First Vision and the priesthood restoration.

Consider Michael Rhodes on the Facsimiles:

But is there any evidence that, even in distorted form, these illustrations were associated with Abraham anciently? There is indeed. I will discuss each facsimile in turn.

Facsimile 1. In an ancient Egyptian papyrus dating to roughly the first or second century ad, there is a lion-couch scene similar to the one shown in facsimile 1. Underneath the illustration, the text reads “Abraham, [Page 225]who upon . . .” There is a break in the text here, so we do not know what word followed. The key point, however, is that an ancient Egyptian document, from approximately the same time period as the papyri Joseph Smith had in his possession, associated Abraham with a lion-couch scene.

Facsimile 2. Egyptologists call documents like facsimile 2 a hypocephalus, Greek for “under the head,” since the document was placed under the head of the deceased in the coffin. Over a hundred examples of them are located in museums around the world.

On an Egyptian papyrus of the early Christian period is the phrase “Abraham, the pupil of the eye of the Wedjat.” In the 162d chapter of the *Book of the Dead*, which tells how to make a *hypocephalus*, the Wedjat eye is described, and the *hypocephalus* itself is called an “eye.”

The *Apocalypse of Abraham*, a pseudepigraphical text dating from the early Christian era, describes a vision Abraham saw while making a sacrifice to God. In this vision, he is shown the plan of the universe, “what is in the heavens, on the earth, in the sea, in the abyss, and in the lower depths.” This language is very close to the phrase found in facsimile 2 (figures 9, 10, and 11), which reads, “O Mighty God, Lord of heaven and earth, of the hereafter, and of his great waters.” In this same text, Abraham sees “the fullness of the universe and its circles in all” and a “picture of creation” with two sides. The similarity with the hypocephalus, which for the Egyptians represents the whole of the world in a circular format, is striking. There is even a [Page 226]description of what are clearly the four figures labeled number 6 in the Joseph Smith hypocephalus. It also tells how Abraham is promised the priesthood, which will continue in his posterity—a promise associated with the temple. He is shown the “host of stars, and the orders they were commanded to carry out, and the elements of the earth obeying them.” This language shows a remarkable parallel to the wording in the book of Abraham.

Facsimile 3. In the *Testament of Abraham*, another pseudepigraphical text of the early Christian era, Abraham sees a vision of the Last Judgment that is unquestionably related to the judgment scene pictured in the 125th chapter of the Book of the Dead, thus clearly associating Abraham with this ancient Egyptian work. One of the Joseph Smith papyri is, in fact, a drawing of this judgment scene from the 125th chapter of the Book of the Dead, and facsimile 3 is a scene closely related to this.

The important point here is that we find ancient Near Eastern documents that are roughly contemporary with the hypocephalus and the other Egyptian papyri purchased by Joseph Smith that relate the scenes portrayed in facsimiles 1, 2, and 3 with Abraham, just as Joseph Smith said. Significantly, none of these documents had even been discovered at Joseph Smith’s time.⁸⁰

[Page 227]Runnells provides none of this relevant information in his letter. Uninformed readers will not learn about the existence and work of people like Hugh Nibley, Michael Rhodes, John Gee, Kerry Muhlestein, Blake Ostler, Will Schryver, John Tvedtnes, and Kevin Barney, to name just a few of the important LDS commentators. When I read, I bring my knowledge of their work with me, and as a consequence, I have a different experience than Runnells intends when he offers complaints like this:

1. Joseph misidentifies the Egyptian god Osiris as Abraham.
2. Misidentifies the Egyptian god Isis as the Pharaoh.
3. Misidentifies the Egyptian god Maat as the Prince of the Pharaoh.
4. Misidentifies the Egyptian god Anubis as a slave.

5. Misidentifies the dead Hor as a waiter.
6. Joseph misidentifies—twice—a female as a male.⁸¹

Jeff Lindsay has a section on his website on these complaints, citing a range of previously published material:

Let's consider both charges. First, critics charge that Joseph's interpretation of Facsimile 3 is wrong because the enthroned figure is Osiris, not Abraham. As we have already seen in the discussion of Facsimile 1, humans can represent Osiris. Indeed, McGregor and Shirts point out that Joseph has actually scored a surprising bulls eye here:⁸²

Notice that Joseph Smith says figure 1 is "Abraham.... with a crown upon his head, representing the Priesthood, as emblematical of the grand Presidency in Heaven." Now interestingly, in Facsimile 3 we have [Page 228]Osiris enthroned as Osiris Khenty-Amentiu. This name means, and I quote, "First (or President) of the Westerners."⁸³ Osiris, as Lord of the Dead, is called Khenty-Amentiu. Khenty means "Before, earlier," as the Egyptologist Alan Gardiner noted,⁸⁴ or preceding, that is, the president, as Hugh Nibley has noted. Joseph Smith is right on the money here.

Second, anti-Mormons also mock Joseph for identifying in Facs. 3 the obviously female figures 2 and 4 as males. Critics such as James R. Smith ask how Joseph possibly could have missed it – suggesting that such terrible blunders show how uninspired Joseph was. McGregor and Shirts provide several pages of information and documentation showing what is very well known about ancient Egypt,⁸⁵ concluding with this:

The ancient Egyptians dressed in costume during their rituals, coronations, and funerals and took on the roles of the deities whose robes they wore, whether male or female. It is that simple. And there is rather an abundant amount of evidence to demonstrate this these days.

An excellent source on the very Egyptian nature of Joseph's interpretation of Facsimile 3 is found in Hugh [Page 229]Nibley's old but valuable work, *Abraham in Egypt*.⁸⁶ With abundant documentation, Nibley illustrates that Egyptians indeed mixed gender roles and linked humans and gods in ritual scenes like that of Facsimile 3. Joseph's interpretation is patently absurd based on our standards and what any school child could see in Joseph's day or ours: those identified as a prince and a king by Joseph are clearly women. And the person on the throne should be the king, not Abraham, and an obviously important central figure should be someone important, not just a household waiter. But as absurd as Joseph's explanation sounds to us, it makes a great deal of sense in light of what we now know about the ancient Egyptians.⁸⁷

Runnells links only to Wikipedia articles for Osiris, Isis, Maat, and Anubis. Lindsay provides a range of sources. As has become typical, the differences in time, effort and sources consulted are telling.

Free Service or Personal Search?

A bitter complaint in *Letter to a CES Director* is that "I never heard about this or that" and as a consequence, asks:

How am I supposed to feel about learning about these disturbing facts at 31-years-old? After making critical life decisions based on trust and faith that the Church was telling me the complete truth about its origins and history? After many books, seminary, EFY, Church [Page 230]history tour, mission, BYU, General Conferences, Scriptures, *Ensigns*, and regular Church attendance?⁸⁸

Runnells wants his readers to comprehend and sympathize with his feelings of shock and betrayal. Let's put aside

the irony of his complaints about important information having been overlooked, and consider his question. How should he feel about it? The answer to this question is closely tied to how a person defines “the Church” and what we can then expect to be provided by that entity, body, or collection of bodies. I’ll return to what “the Church” is to me shortly.

Back in 1974, when I was on my mission in England, we were invited to show a film, “Meet the Mormons,” to a group of middle-schoolers in Colne, Lancashire. As the movie went on, we could see these kids, younger than we, passing around what were obviously anti-Mormon pamphlets. During the Q&A, I ran into some questions I was not prepared to answer. I had been active all my life, and had attended all sorts of meetings from primary, MIA, Sunday School, priesthood, sacrament, to conferences, road shows, institute. I had read the Book of Mormon four or five times, and part of the D&C and New Testament. I calculated that at times, I was involved in LDS sponsored activities for fifteen hours a week. And here some kids passing around their first anti-LDS pamphlets asked me some questions I could not answer. How should I feel?

I learned that I could not trust the institutional arms of the Church to provide me with all the information I might need. If I wanted to know, to be prepared, I had to take personal responsibility. In retrospect, my program involved three elements. Keep my eyes open. Give things time. And re-examine my own assumptions now and then. The alternative is to not pay attention. Insist on final answers now. And never [Page 231]re-examine my own assumptions. Either choice on these three points has consequences in life.

Sixteen or seventeen years later, while I was living in California, I met a disillusioned member who had his beliefs shattered by an encounter with books from Jerald and Sandra Tanner. He loaned me *The Changing World of Mormonism*, which I promptly read and which at that point in time, gave me no trouble. (When I more recently read *Letter to a CES Director*, I thought of it as Tanners Lite for the Twitter generation, and in that sense, all “old news” to me.) The young man who loaned me the book was incredulous at my reaction. “How can you know what you know, and believe what you believe?” he asked. I still think it was a very good question, worth serious consideration.

In the sixteen or so years up to that point, I had been busy learning on my own initiative. I started with the scriptures, not just reading to get through pages, or to memorize important proof texts, but pursuing my own questions. A year later, a member loaned me Hugh Nibley’s *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*. The experience of reading that remarkable book expanded my mind and enlarged my soul (as Alma 32 puts it) and left me hungering for more. When I got back home, I noticed in a low bookshelf in the family room, stacks of old *Ensigns*, and older *Improvement Eras*. As I browsed, I noticed the Nibley series on Enoch, and decided to read them. Then in the older *Improvement Eras*, I found most of the twenty-nine part series on “A New Look at the Pearl of Great Price.” I read them with pleasure and excitement, and a good bit of embarrassment on realizing that they had been coming into my home for years, and I hadn’t so much as given them a glance. Whose fault was that?

The unavoidable answer to that question is why I personally cannot share the disillusion that Runnells displays. Besides reading through neglected resources at home, I also bought books, prowled the stacks in libraries, read the back issues of [Page 232]*BYU Studies*, *Dialogue*, *The Improvement Era*, and *Sunstone*. I used the things I learned from the best books and journals to further direct my learning. A friend told me about the newly organized Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, and I began acquiring as many reprints as I could afford and read everything in their journals and then their books. I found that I could see a lot further by standing on the shoulders of giants than by crouching shoulder to shoulder with pygmies. So by the time I encountered the Tanners, I was well prepared by my previous readings. I have consistently found that I learn far more about the arguments of the critics by reading the best apologetic writings, than I learn of the arguments of the defenders by reading critical writings. When I did finally read something that gave me trouble for a few days, the resolution turned into my first essay in LDS letters.⁸⁹ I read the work of the best LDS scholars with pleasure, excitement, and faith, and every now and then found that I had something to offer.

So why does my faith expand, when Runnells’s faith shatters?

Brittle things are far more prone to shattering than flexible things. Consider how traumatized Runnells is when he

mentions his encounters with non-correlated thinking,—that things might be different than he had understood—and this, from Joseph Smith:

But there has been a great difficulty in getting anything into the heads of this generation. It has been like splitting hemlock knots with a corn-dodger for a wedge, and a pumpkin for a beetle. Even the Saints are slow to understand.

[Page 233]I have tried for a number of years to get the minds of the Saints prepared to receive the things of God; but we frequently see some of them, after suffering all they have for the work of God, will fly to pieces like glass as soon as anything comes that is contrary to their traditions: they cannot stand the fire at all.⁹⁰

A quality that permits any mind to expand rather than shatter must be a certain amount of flexibility. Remember the earlier quotation from Ian Barbour: “If a deduction is not confirmed experimentally, one can never be sure which one, from among the many assumptions on which the deduction was based, was in error. A network of hypothesis and observations is always tested together. Any particular hypothesis can be maintained by rejecting or adjusting other auxiliary hypotheses.”⁹¹

Look at again at Runnells, and check for any flexibility in his network of observations and hypotheses.

I was amazed to learn that, according to these unofficial apologists, translate doesn’t really mean translate, horses aren’t really horses (they’re tapirs), chariots aren’t really chariots (since tapirs can’t pull chariots without wheels), steel isn’t really steel, Hill Cumorah isn’t really in New York (it’s possibly in Mesoamerica), Lamanites aren’t really the principal ancestors of the Native American Indians, marriage isn’t really marriage (if they’re Joseph’s marriages? They’re just mostly non-sexual spiritual sealings), and prophets aren’t really prophets (only when they’re heretics teaching today’s false doctrine).

[Page 234]I’ve already pointed out the problem with his approach to the word “translate.” If you follow the link he provides in his complaint that to apologists, “horses aren’t really horses,” we come to a Maxwell Institute article⁹² that demonstrates a flexibility of thought and observation that Runnells does not pass along. The article describes some existing evidence for horse bones, which means, the Book of Mormon mention of horses just might be the horses he expects. It also describes the common practice of loan-shift, “well known to historians and anthropologists who study cross-cultural contact.” Runnells misrepresents both the hypotheses and the observations made in the essay, overlooking a clear description of real possibilities in favor of an inaccurate and brittle declaration of unacceptable and unreasonable identity. He filters the flexibility and the reason out of the essay when making his own summary. The same mental inflexibility colors every phrase in the paragraph, every page of the letter, and, consequently, Runnells tends to misrepresent every apologetic argument and supporting observation that he complains about. The end result is obvious brittleness.⁹³

Compare Alma 32:18, and Alma’s contrast between people who want to “know” with absolute finality, and those who settle for open-ended “cause to believe.” Closed brittle thinking, contrasted with open-ended, tentative thinking. In describing how faith works, Alma describes how the planting and nurturing of a seed initiates a process in which change in the original seed is a sign of success. Swelling, sprouting, till, [Page 235]“your understanding doth begin to be enlightened, and your mind doth begin to expand.”⁹⁴ Runnells appears to want an experience in which he plants a seed, comes back to wash off the mud and dirt to find that it remains the same as it ever was. No swelling, no unexpected sprouts, roots, leaves, branches, growth, and certainly no unexpected fruit. To him, nothing that looks or acts differently than the original seed can be good. Expansion, change, growth can only shatter him, like gentle grass bursting through asphalt.

Victims and Survivors

Runnells basically describes himself as a victim of the Church. I don't see myself as a victim of the church, despite my own experience in finding myself unprepared to deal with unexpected and difficult questions. But I do remember that the young man who gave me *The Changing World of Mormonism* actually had a difficult time talking with me because doing so would draw him back into the trauma of his loss of faith. Now, I would recognize what he was experiencing as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. And now, one of the books I recommend to people I work with as part of my current church calling includes this kind of advice for dealing with trauma:⁹⁵

- Find initial support immediately
- Re-establish safety
- Practice good self care
- Create boundaries between yourself and the trauma
- Counter dissociation
- Begin emotional processing and grieving
- Use grieving and processing methods to help heal. (consider EMDR)
- [Page 236]Develop personal empowerment
- Develop healthy communication skills
- Develop healthy conflict management skills
- Reframe yourself as survivor rather than victim
- Consider forgiveness
- Find positive life purpose

Notice that part of healing from trauma involves reframing yourself as a survivor rather than a victim, and that doing so involves a sequence of positive actions. Victimhood simply involves the ongoing nurture of grievances and no movement in the direction of healing.

What a Church Has and What a Church Is

So what is the Church? What should I expect from it? A church has many things but the church is not the things that it has. Our Church has a headquarters, leaders, members, employees, buildings, educational materials, missionaries, beliefs, ordinances, properties, scholars, critics, and so forth. But the things that the church has are not what the church is.

Runnells's expectations of the Church were that members have a rightful expectation that all knowledge must be provided to us, presumably by certifiably Omniscient Sunday School teachers, and all-knowing Primary teachers, and all-seeing Sacrament meeting speakers, all through official channels and approved books. The church did not meet his expectations, and consequently, he has resentments. Part of recovery involves dismantling the grievance story and letting go of resentments.

To me, the church is an assembly of people who have made covenants with God: people of all different ages, temperaments, cultures, experience, understanding, maturity, spiritual gifts, and personal resources. Because of the diversity, I do not expect that any administrative materials or programs can possibly address the widely divergent needs that different members have with a one-size-fits-all solution. That is just to help us get [Page 237]started, to provide a foundation to build on, or, as Alma puts it, to provide seeds for us to nurture. So, one of the covenants we make with God (not with each other) is to "sustain" one another. This is another place where my wife and I found our minds and souls enlarged by turning to a dictionary.

Sustain⁹⁶

1. To keep up; keep going; maintain. Aid, assist, comfort.
2. to supply as with food or provisions:

3. to hold up; support
4. to bear; endure
5. to suffer; experience: *to sustain a broken leg*.
6. to allow; admit; favor
7. to agree with; confirm.

This means that I as a member of the gathering, as part of the church, when I raise my hand to sustain other members in their callings, I promise God that at the very least, I will put up with whatever difficulties arise. We all have choices to make in dealing with people who don't live up to our expectations. One involves whether to adjust our own expectations. Another involves whether to resent people for being human, or to forgive them, as well as ourselves, for being human. Our choices turn out to affect the quality of our lives as well as our faith.[Page 238]

1. Jeremy T. Runnells, "Letter to a CES Director: Why I Lost My Testimony," 5; <http://cesletter.com/Letter-to-a-CES-Director.pdf>, citing Peter Henerson and Kristina Cooke, "Mormonism Besieged by the Modern Age," Reuters, 30 January 2012; <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-mormonchurch/special-report-mormonism-besieged-by-the-modern-age-idUKTRE80T1CP20120130>.
2. Runnells, "Letter to a CES Director," 5.2
3. See Jeff Lindsay, "LDS FAQ: Mormon Answers"; <http://www.jefflindsay.com/LDSFAQ/index.html>.
4. While I will discuss various complaints that Runnells makes, I do not attempt a point-by-point rebuttal. Such information is easily found, in my view, by those who seek it. See "Criticism of Mormonism/Online documents/Letter to a CES Director"; http://en.fairmormon.org/Criticism_of_Mormonism/Online_documents/Letter_to_a_CES_Director. See also Michael R. Ash, *Shaken Faith Syndrome: Strengthening One's Testimony in the Face of Criticism and Doubt*, 2nd ed. (Redding, CA: FairMormon, 2013).
5. See Ash, *Shaken Faith Syndrome*.
6. Hugh Nibley, *Old Testament and Related Studies* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1986), 65.
7. Runnells, "Letter to a CES Director," 6.
8. Runnells, "Debunking FAIR's Debunking"; <http://cesletter.com/debunking-fairmormon/book-of-mormon.html>.
9. Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 65.
10. Betty Edwards, *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain: A Course in Enhancing Creativity and Artistic Awareness*, rev. ed. (Los Angeles: P.P. Tarcher, 1989), 134.

[11.](#) Runnells, “Letter to a CES Director,” 80.

[12.](#) *American Dictionary of the English Language*, s.v. “translate”; <http://webstersdictionary1828.com/>.

[13.](#) Kevin Christensen, “Biblical Keys for Discerning True and False Prophets”; https://www.fairlatterdaysaints.org/answers/Biblical_Keys_for_Discerning_True_and_False_Prophets/Tests.

[14.](#) *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1972), 268.

[15.](#) John W. Welch, *Illuminating the Sermon at the Temple and the Sermon on the Mount* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1999), 187.

[16.](#) Welch, *Illuminating the Sermon at the Temple and the Sermon on the Mount*, 201–202.

[17.](#) John W. Welch, *The Sermon on the Mount in Light of the Temple* (London: Ashgate, 2009).

[18.](#) Kuhn, *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 59.

[19.](#) Runnells, “Letter to a CES Director,” 17.

[20.](#) See 4QDeut for Deuteronomy 32:8–9 and Margaret Barker, *The Great Angel: A Study of Israel’s Second God*, (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992).

[21.](#) Barker, *The Great Angel*, 4–5. See also Brant A. Gardner, “Monotheism, Messiah, and Mormon’s Book”; <http://www.fairmormon.org/perspectives/fair-conferences/2003-fair-conference/2003-monotheism-messiah-and-mormons-book>. For a printed version of this paper, see Brant A. Gardner, “Excursus: The Nephite Understanding of God,” in *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 1:214–222.

[22.](#) Kevin Christensen, “The Temple, The Monarchy, and Wisdom: Lehi’s World and the Scholarship of Margaret Barker” in *Glimpses of Lehi’s Jerusalem*, ed. John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann H. Seely (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004), 449–522.

[23.](#) On the mother of God in general see Margaret Barker, *The Mother of the Lord, Volume 1: The Lady in the Temple* (London: T&T Clark, 2012).

[24.](#) 3 Nephi 19:20–23.

[25.](#) 3 Nephi 18:35.

[26.](#) 3 Nephi 11:7

- [27.](#) Boyd Kirkland, “An Evolving God,” *Dialogue* 28/1 (Spring 1995): v, cited in Runnells, “Letter to a CES Director,” 19.
- [28.](#) See for example, Kevin Christensen, “Paradigms Regained: A Survey of Margaret Barker’s Scholarship and Its Significance for Mormon Studies,” *FARMS Occasional Papers* 2 (2001).
- [29.](#) See Ari D. Bruening and David L. Paulsen, “The Development of the Mormon Understanding of God: Early Mormon Modalism and Other Myths,” *FARMS Review of Books* 13/2 (2001): 109–69.
- [30.](#) Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 370.
- [31.](#) Barker, *The Great Angel*, 97.
- [32.](#) Barker, *The Great Angel*, 102–103.
- [33.](#) Nibley, “Before Adam,” 65.
- [34.](#) See Margaret Barker, “Reflections on Biblical Studies in the Twentieth Century,” 8; <http://www.margaretbarker.com/Papers/ReflectionsOnBiblicalStudies.pdf>.
- [35.](#) Kuhn, *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 111.
- [36.](#) See John A. Tvedtnes, Brian M. Hauglid and John Gee, eds., *Traditions About the Early Life of Abraham* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2001).
- [37.](#) Runnells, “Letter to a CES Director,” 25, includes four pictures showing the Anubis figure in lion-couch scenes for comparison, none of which have the raised leg that suggests life.
- [38.](#) John Gee, “Research and Perspectives: Abraham in Ancient Egyptian Texts,” *Ensign*, July 1992, 60.
- [39.](#) Runnells, “Letter to a CES Director,” 15. Notice ghd rhetorically helpfully ambiguous language. That The Great War was written for New York school children does not necessarily mean that Joseph Smith, or anyone in Palmyra, ever saw a copy. It’s not in the Manchester Library, which may not matter since the Smith’s were not members, and the Book of Mormon was translated in Harmony, which had no library.
- [40.](#) Benjamin L. McGuire, “The Late War Against the Book of Mormon,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 7 (2013): 323–355; <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-late-war-against-the-book-of-mormon/>.
- [41.](#) Benjamin L. McGuire, “Finding Parallels: Some Cautions and Criticisms, Part One,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 5 (2013): 1–59; <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/finding-parallels-some-cautions-and-criticisms-part-one/>; “Finding Parallels: Some Cautions and Criticisms, Part Two,” 61–104; <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/finding-parallels-some-cautions-and-criticisms-part-two/>.

[42.](#) Runnells, “Debunking FAIR’s Debunking”; <http://cesletter.com/debunking-fairmormon/>.

[43.](#) Compare how Runnells sets the table regarding the Book of Abraham (basically a bowl of selectively picked cherries) with this comprehensive bibliography of relevant studies by Tim Barker, “Bibliography”; <http://thebookofabraham.blogspot.com/p/bibliography.html>.

[44.](#) Runnells, “Letter to a CES Director,” 22.

[45.](#) See the FairMormon response at http://en.fairmormon.org/Criticism_of_Mormonism/Online_documents/Letter_to_a_CES_Director/First_Vision_Concerns_26_Questions#.22There_is_absolutely_no_record_of_a_First_Vision_prior_to_1832.22

[46.](#) Runnells, “Debunking FAIR’s Debunking”; <http://cesletter.com/debunking-fairmormon/first-vision.html>. Compare Richard Bushman, “The Visionary World of Joseph Smith,” *BYU Studies* 37/1 (1997–98): 183–204. See also Neal E. Lambert and Richard H. Cracroft, “Literary Form and Historical Understanding: Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” *Journal of Mormon History* 7 (1980): 31–42. And see James B. Allen, “Emergence of a Fundamental: The Expanding Role of Joseph Smith’s First Vision in Mormon Religious Thought,” *Journal of Mormon History* 7 (1980): 43–62.

[47.](#) See Grant Palmer, *An Insider’s View of Mormon Origins* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), pp. 215-234. Compare Steven Harper, “Trustworthy History?” in *The FARMS Review* 15/2 (2003) pp. 288-193.

[48.](#) “Primary sources/Joseph Smith, Jr./First Vision accounts/1832”; http://en.fairmormon.org/Primary_sources/Joseph_Smith,_Jr./First_Vision_accounts/1832.

[49.](#) Runnells, “Letter to a CES Director,” 49.

[50.](#) Runnells, “Debunking FAIR’s Debunking”; <http://cesletter.com/debunking-fairmormon/priesthood-restoration.html>.

[51.](#) His preference for “official” thought rather than “the best books” is telling (D&C 88:118). Also consider John Boyd’s work on the OODA loop, and the implications when “the most effective organizations have a highly decentralized chain of command that utilizes objective-driven orders, or directive control, rather than method-driven orders in order to harness the mental capacity and creative abilities of individual commanders at each level. In 2003, this power to the edge concept took the form of a Department of Defense publication “Power to the Edge: Command ... Control ... in the Information Age” by Dr. David S. Alberts and Richard E. Hayes. Boyd argued that such a structure creates a flexible “organic whole” that is quicker to adapt to rapidly changing situations.” See “John Boyd (military strategist)”; [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Boyd_\(military_strategist\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Boyd_(military_strategist)).

[52.](#) See Sidney B. Sperry, “Were There Two Cumorahs?” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 4/1 (Spring 1995): 260–268.

[53.](#) David A. Palmer, *In Search of Cumorah: New Evidences for the Book of Mormon from Ancient Mexico* (Bountiful, UT: Horizon, 1981).

- [54.](#) See John Sorenson, *The Geography of Book of Mormon Events: A Source Book*. Revised (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1992), 22–31.
- [55.](#) Runnells, “Letter to a CES Director,” 8.
- [56.](#) For a convenient survey of the specific Book of Mormon details, Edwin M. Woolley, “The Two Cumorahs”; http://www.bmaf.org/articles/two_cumorahs_wooley
- [57.](#) Brant Gardner, “The Social History of the Early Nephites,” at <http://www.fairmormon.org/perspectives/fair-conferences/2001-fair-conference/2001-a-social-history-of-the-early-nephites> . Also see John Sorenson, *Mormon’s Codex* (Deseret Book, Salt Lake City: 2013), 542. Also Brant Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon vol. 1 First Nephi* (Kofford Books, Salt Lake City: 2007), 352.
- [58.](#) John Sorenson, “The Composition of Lehi’s Family” in *Nephite Culture and Society: Selected Papers* (New Sage Books, Salt Lake City: 1997), 22.
- [59.](#) Matthew Roper, “Nephi’s Neighbors: Book of Mormon Peoples and Precolumbian Populations” *FARMS Review* 15/2 (2003): 91-128.
- [60.](#) See Brant Gardner, “The Social History of the Early Nephites,” at <http://www.fairmormon.org/perspectives/fair-conferences/2001-fair-conference/2001-a-social-history-of-the-early-nephites>.
- [61.](#) Email from Brant A. Gardner, quoted in Kevin Christensen, “Truth and Method: Reflections on Dan Vogel’s Approach to the Book of Mormon,” *FARMS Review* 16/4 (2004): 309, 311–12. For the results of his approach, see his six-volume Second Witness commentaries.
- [62.](#) Runnells, “Letter to a CES Director,” 8.
- [63.](#) See for instance Matthew 16:22–23; D&C 3:5–15.
- [64.](#) Runnells, “Letter to a CES Director,” 67.
- [65.](#) Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 185.
- [66.](#) Barbour, *Myth, Models, and Paradigms: A Comparative Study in Science and Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974) , 99.
- [67.](#) Hugh Nibley, “Before Adam,” *Old Testament and Related Studies, Collected Works of Hugh Nibley 1* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1986), 49-85.
- [68.](#) Nibley, “Before Adam,” 70.

- [69.](#) See Hugh Nibley, *Eloquent Witness: Nibley on Himself, Others, and the Temple* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2008), 445–482.
- [70.](#) David Bailey, “History of the LDS Church’s view on the age of the earth and evolution” <http://www.sciencemeetsreligion.org/lds/lds-history-evolution.php>
- [71.](#) Nibley, *Old Testament and Related Studies*, 73.
- [72.](#) For a range of approaches to the flood, see Duane E. Jeffery, “Noah’s Flood: Modern Scholarship and Mormon Traditions,” *Sunstone*, October 2004, 27–45.
- [73.](#) Runnells, “Letter to a CES Director,” 15.
- [74.](#) McGuire, “Finding Parallels: Some Cautions and Criticisms, Part Two,” 81.
- [75.](#) Jeff Lindsay, “Was the Book of Mormon Plagiarized from Walt Whitman’s Leaves of Grass?”; <http://www.jefflindsay.com/bomsource.shtml>.
- [76.](#) Jeff Lindsay, “Plagiarism in the Book of Mormon? Is it Derived from Modern Writings?”; http://www.jefflindsay.com/LDSFAQ/FQ_BMProb3.shtml.
- [77.](#) Runnells, “Letter to a CES Director,” 30.
- [78.](#) www.MormonInfoGraphics.com
- [79.](#) Runnells, “Letter to a CES Director,” 27–28.
- [80.](#) Michael D. Rhodes, “Teaching the Book of Abraham Facsimiles,” *Religious Educator* 4/2 (2003): 115–123; <https://rsc.byu.edu/vol-4-no-2-2003/teaching-book-abraham-facsimiles>.
- [81.](#) Runnells, “Letter to a CES Director,” 28.
- [82.](#) McGregor and Shirts, 213–214.
- [83.](#) Oman Sety and Hanny El Zeini, *Abydos: Holy City of Ancient Egypt*, Los Angeles: LL, 1981, 7
- [84.](#) Alan H. Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar: Being an Introduction to the Study of Hieroglyphs*, 3rd. ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982, 130, 133, 156, 529, 585, 613.
- [85.](#) McGregor and Shirts, 214. See also 213–217.

- [86.](#) Hugh W. Nibley. *Abraham in Egypt. The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley 14*. Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2000, 382-465.
- [87.](#) See Jeff Lindsay, “LDS FAQ: Mormon Answers, Questions About the Book of Abraham, Part 2, Evidences for Plausibility”; http://www.jefflindsay.com/LDSFAQ/FQ_Abraham2.shtml.
- [88.](#) Runnells, “Letter to a CES Director,” 80.
- [89.](#) Kevin Christensen, “New Wine and New Bottles: Scriptural Scholarship as Sacrament,” *Dialogue* 24/3 (Fall 1991): 121–129.
- [90.](#) Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 331.
- [91.](#) Barbour, *Myth, Models, and Paradigms*, 99.
- [92.](#) “Horses in the Book of Mormon”; <http://publications.mi.byu.edu/fullscreen/?pub=1055&index=1>
- [93.](#) As an exercise for the interested, map his story and my story to the Perry Scheme for Cognitive and Ethical Growth. See <http://dl.dropbox.com/u/22100469/Perry%20Scheme.pdf> . I’ve grown to prefer the 9 Position Perry Scheme to the Iron Rodder/Liahona dichotomy that has been floating around in LDS circles since the 1960s. See Richard Poll, “What the Church Means to People Like Me,” *Dialogue* 2/4 (Winter 1967): 107–117.
- [94.](#) Alma 32:34.
- [95.](#) Barbara Steffens and Marsha Means, *Your Sexually Addicted Spouse: How Partners Can Cope and Heal* (Far Hills, NJ: New Horizons Press, 2009). I’m the Addiction Recovery Representative for my stake.
- [96.](#) *World Book Dictionary*, s.v. “sustain.”