

Clyde Forsberg's *Equal Rites* and the Exoticizing of Mormonism

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Supposedly, now is an auspicious time to be doing scholarship on Mormonism. According to a 2002 *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, Mormon studies has received a “surge of scholarly interest” from specialists in various disciplines.¹ Just since the opening of the new century, several significant works on Mormonism have rolled off university presses, including heavyweights Oxford and Cambridge.² In March 2003, Yale Divinity School hosted a conference on Mormon history and philosophy, the first such event to be held at an Ivy League school, advertised by organizers as “the most significant event in Mormon scholarship ever.”³ Efforts are underway to create Mormon studies courses or professorships at three institutions of higher education: Utah Valley State College, Utah State University, and Claremont Graduate University. Within Mormon intellectual circles, there is a feeling that if Mormon studies has not actually “arrived” as a recognized and valued subfield of academic inquiry, it is at least close to docking.

A new publication should give enthusiasts pause. In 2004, Columbia University Press released the latest title in its Religion and American Culture series: *Equal Rites: The Book of Mormon, Masonry, Gender, and American Culture*, by Clyde Forsberg.⁴ Reviews of Forsberg's book are just beginning to appear, but so far reviewers have dismissed it as “fundamentally flawed” and have questioned whether it can even be considered “legitimate scholarly work.”⁵ More such assessments are bound to come, especially from Mormon reviewers. Forsberg's thesis is wildly revisionist. He professes to have discovered in the Book of Mormon a secret message which somehow managed to go unnoticed from 1830 to the present. Beneath a façade of Christian primitivism, Forsberg avers, Joseph Smith ac-

tually sought to found a new kind of androgynous Christian Masonry patterned after the Knights Templar. The Book of Mormon, as Forsberg reads it, is a coded blueprint for this Masonic order. Forsberg also discovers in the Book of Mormon an ambitious plan, never initiated, to achieve racial harmony through interracial polygamy. Though he positions himself in existing scholarly debates about Masonic or hermetic influence in Mormonism, Forsberg's reading of the Book of Mormon is eccentric, a sedulous but undisciplined amassing of parallels and speculations. Forsberg does to the Book of Mormon something akin to what popular esoteric authors Michael Drosnin and Margaret Starbird have done to the Bible⁶—except that Forsberg's work bears the imprint of a reputable university press.

Columbia University Press's decision to publish this sensationalistic revision of Mormon origins is a particularly dramatic symptom of a larger problem that hampers the mainstreaming of Mormon studies. Forsberg's book was published on the recommendation of John L. Brooke, who in 1994 won a Bancroft Prize for his own hermetic account of Mormon origins, *The Refiner's Fire*, which traced Mormonism to a culture of alchemy brought to America by the Radical Reformation.⁷ Reviews of *Refiner's Fire* reflected a divide between orthodox Mormons (those who accept Mormon faith claims as literal, historical reality)⁸ and everyone else doing work in this field (a broad spectrum ranging from heterodox Mormons to evangelical Protestants to confirmed atheists). While other reviewers hailed Brooke's work as groundbreaking, orthodox Mormons complained that Brooke had misrepresented their faith. As I will argue below, the Mormon critics were right, but orthodox Mormons have a credibility problem that hindered them from making their case convincingly.

A close reading of non-Mormon scholars' reviews of *Refiner's Fire* in the context of contemporary journalistic accounts of Mormonism reveals that Mormons are widely regarded, in and out of the academy, as exotic; they are also commonly perceived as being in denial about facts that debunk their faith claims. Expectations of Mormon Otherness and suspicion of Mormons' own accounts of their faith made non-Mormon reviewers receptive to Brooke's hermetic interpretation despite Mormon reviewers' just criticisms. Ten years later, that same state of affairs made possible the publication of *Equal Rites*. A climate in which scholars expect to discover exotic secrets in the Mormon past lends plausibility to a thesis even as fantastic as Forsberg's. His book's publication is a result of the disparate

horizons of plausibility that orthodox Mormons and others bring to the study of Mormonism, a disparity that impedes constructive scholarly conversation about this religious movement.

As I analyze Forsberg's and others' exoticizing representations of Mormonism, I am guided by accounts of interpretation expounded by Stanley Fish and Jane Tompkins. Fish maintains that, though interpretation is "usually thought to be a matter of discerning what is there," it is in fact "a matter of knowing how to *produce* what can thereafter be said to be there."⁹ Interpretive communities teach us what to see and thus how to read. Tompkins approaches this same idea in the context of historical interpretation when she explains that any interpretation, any seeing, "is evidence of values we already hold, of judgments already made, of facts already perceived as facts."¹⁰ In this study I attempt to identify the prior knowledge or dispositions that shape how different historians interpret Mormonism. Since I assume that work in Mormon history is, inevitably, a declaration of one's relationship to Mormon faith claims, it is only fair to indicate my own relation to Mormonism. I am Mormon by upbringing but have settled into an unorthodox Mormon identity such that Mormonism's significance for me as a biblically rooted spiritual tradition is unconnected to the historicity of its faith claims. This sets me apart from orthodox Mormon historians, for whom historical veracity is indispensable. By contrast, I am predisposed to naturalistic or environmentalist interpretations of Mormon origins; yet I find the particular interpretations offered by Brooke and Forsberg unpersuasive.

I

A connection between Mormonism and Masonry during the last years of Joseph Smith's life is undisputed. Between 1841 and 1845, four Masonic lodges were established in Nauvoo and surrounding Mormon communities, a Masonic temple was built (in addition to the Mormons' own temple), and some 1,300 Mormons were raised to the degree of Master Mason, Joseph Smith being one of the very first. Masonic parallels have been observed in Mormon temple rituals inaugurated in Nauvoo and in rhetoric surrounding the foundation of the women's Relief Society, both of which occurred within two months of Smith's Masonic initiation.¹¹ What is disputed is whether the Masonic-Mormon connection in Nauvoo is a reversal of earlier anti-Masonic attitudes on Smith's part. Researchers who see a reversal point to early revelations of Smith, including

the Book of Mormon, that warn against "secret combinations." Orthodox Mormon historians have resisted reading the Book of Mormon's condemnation of secret combinations as reflecting nineteenth-century anti-Masonic rhetoric. This is not surprising, given the religious issues at stake. Anti-Masonic readings tend to assume that Smith is the author of the Book of Mormon (rather than the translator of an ancient record by the power of God); and since contemporary Mormons are not inclined to regard Masonry as a satanic conspiracy, they are naturally loathe to believe that their scripture presents it as such.¹²

Like orthodox Mormon scholars, Forsberg argues against anti-Masonic readings of the Book of Mormon but for a very different reason. He believes that the Book of Mormon is a secret communiqué to Freemasons gone underground after the devastating Morgan affair of 1826.¹³ In Forsberg's view, Smith sought to restore not primitive Christianity but "a beleaguered Masonic political order" threatened by the rise of feminized evangelical Protestantism. Smith, Forsberg asserts, wanted to open a middle way "between (Evangelical) feminism and (Masonic) patriarchy."¹⁴ Not just at Nauvoo, but from the beginning, Smith envisioned Mormonism as a Christian androgynous Masonry, where women would be brought into the lodge to worship with their husbands "at the altar of true manhood."¹⁵ Thus Smith aimed to heal the rifts between men and women, between Masons and evangelicals, and between York Rite and Scottish Rite Masons. Smith also aspired to promote greater racial harmony by instituting a system of interracial polygamy, under which white men would take white wives and Native American or African concubines to gradually produce a whiter race.

No aspect of this far-ranging agenda is explicit in Smith's writings. Forsberg's thesis is that we have to look beyond the seemingly evangelical meanings at the surface to discern the "hidden Masonic agenda" underneath.¹⁶ Reading the Book of Mormon with an eye for scattered, often obscure, Masonic allusions, Forsberg is confident that he has uncovered Smith's true, unrealized intentions for Mormonism. The Book of Mormon is a Masonic romance, a coded call for America's divided, demoralized Masons to join a new order of Christian Knights Templar. Indeed, the act of reading the book is a kind of literary initiation into the order, anticipating actual initiation into the Mormon lodge/temple built at Nauvoo.¹⁷

In fairness to Forsberg, the question of Masonic influence on Mor-

mon origins, predating Nauvoo, deserves serious consideration. As Forsberg underscores, several early Mormon converts, including Smith's brother Hyrum, were Royal Arch Masons.¹⁸ Researchers before Forsberg have noted that Royal Arch Masonry has a legend about finding lost writing on a gold plate hidden in an underground vault, recalling Smith's claim to have translated the Book of Mormon from golden plates he unearthed under the direction of an angel.¹⁹ For those interested in identifying environmental influences on the imaginative matrix from which Mormonism sprang, the Royal Arch legend would be a plausible origin for the notion of golden plates,²⁰ and there may be something to be said for Smith's golden plates story having special resonance for converts who were Royal Arch Masons. Forsberg's question, "Why did so many Masons—Royal Arch devotees in particular—convert to Mormonism in the early years?" opens up a fruitful line of inquiry, with the caveat that Forsberg's phrase "so many" exaggerates the Masonic presence in pre-Nauvoo Mormonism.²¹ But Forsberg provides a model of how *not* to pursue that inquiry.

Forsberg's claim that Mormonism has a "hidden Masonic agenda" is as incredible as John Allegro's theory that the Jesus stories are parables covering up a mushroom cult, and it is only somewhat less incredible than the notion of a Merovingian bloodline descended from Christ and the Madeleine, as popularized by Dan Brown.²² No Mormons in Smith's day have left statements indicating that they understood Mormonism the way Forsberg understands it; no Masons in Smith's day have left statements indicating that they understood Mormonism the way Forsberg says they would have. This total absence of contemporary evidence does not trouble Forsberg, however, since he contends that Mormonism's Masonic agenda was a secret. By this logic, the absence of corroboration for his thesis is corroboration for his thesis. The secret is hinted at but never openly expounded. Readers have to assemble the scattered clues. Forsberg may or may not believe himself the first to have solved the puzzle, but he is the first to put the purported solution on display for all to see.

Forsberg employs a hermetic hermeneutic akin to that satirized in *Foucault's Pendulum*, a novel by acclaimed semiotician Umberto Eco. Eco's characters, employees of a publishing firm, are fascinated by a class of authors they dub "Diabolicals" who deluge them with manuscripts on esoteric subjects such as the Knights Templar, the Grail, Rosicrucians, cabala, alchemy, telluric currents, Atlantis, or ancient transoceanic contacts

between, for example, Roman legionnaires and the Maya. Despite their bewilderingly diverse conclusions, the Diabolicals are united in the assumption that “every word written or spoken has more than its literal meaning, that it tells us of a Secret. The rule is simple: Suspect, only suspect. You can read subtexts even in a traffic sign.”²³ The essence of this hermeneutic is analogy: searching for meaning by searching for similarity. With enough creativity, however, anything can be analogized to anything else (as one character in the novel exemplifies with an elaborate comparison between the sephiroth of cabala and the workings of an automobile). How, then, to decide which analogies are good—that is, which analogies are meaningful? For the Diabolicals, good analogies are simply analogies that work. The fact that any analogy could be made to work is not a problem the Diabolicals recognize; their propensity to look for esoteric analogies, specifically, is a result of their exposure to, and credence in, other esoteric analogies. The result of their reading is a “logical, irrefutable web of analogy, semblance, suspicion.”²⁴

In one of the epigraphs for *Foucault's Pendulum*, Eco quotes from a French work on Jules Verne by Michel Lamy, who argues for a hidden hermetic agenda behind Verne's oeuvre, not unlike the argument Forsberg makes for Smith. Eco's epigraph provides a sample of Lamy's hermeneutic: “Phileas Fogg. A name that is also a signature: *Eas* in Greek, has the sense of the global (it is therefore the equivalent of *pan*, of *poly*,) and Phileas is the same as Polyphile. As for Fogg, it is the English for *brouillard* . . . and no doubt Verne belonged to [the purported secret society] ‘Le Brouillard.’ . . . And further, doesn't [Fogg] belong to the Reform Club, whose initials, R.C., designate the reforming Rose + Cross?”²⁵

Forsberg adopts a similarly unsystematic approach to linguistic parallels when he attempts to interpret a magical parchment owned by the Smith family as a Royal Arch tracing board. By reorienting some apparently nonsensical characters so that they resemble Greek letters (some capital, some lowercase), by plugging in missing letters, by proposing that one letter stands for an entire word, and by reading a magical symbol resembling the characters *2H* as shorthand for a double *eta*, he manages to come up with a Greek phrase that a Masonic encyclopedia informs him once appeared on a Royal Arch tracing board. The encyclopedia translates the Greek as “In the beginning was the Word.” For the same phrase, Forsberg offers the alternative translations: “in God(s) Word,” “God in the Word,” “in God is the Word,” or “the Word is in God.” The last translation in

that list he calls “the quintessential lesson of the Master, of Third Degree of the Scottish Rite.” When he is at a loss to explain some features of the parchment in Masonic terms, Forsberg decides that these are “creative departures . . . that possibly derive from something in the cabala.” What that something might be, he does not say.²⁶

The nature of Forsberg’s project is such that evidence for his thesis can never be more than suggestive. Qualifiers such as “may,” “might,” “could,” and so on punctuate his pages, as do rhetorical questions and parenthetical glosses. No analogy is too tenuous to be put forward as a subtle hint of Smith’s veiled intentions. The fact that Smith said the Book of Mormon was written in “Reformed Egyptian” is, Forsberg proposes, a covert allusion to a degree in Masonry called the “Reformed Rite.”²⁷ The Book of Mormon names Gazelam, Nephite, and Liahona are said to resemble Gibalim, Noachite, and Elion, names used in Masonry.²⁸ Forsberg finds it revealing that another Book of Mormon name, Abinadi, begins with the same three letters as Abiff, the name of a central character in Masonic lore; and he sees an “uncanny” resemblance between Hiram Abiff and the Book of Mormon’s Nephi because the latter is said to have built a temple.²⁹ A vision described in the Book of Mormon that includes, among other things, the tree of life and a great and spacious building resembles an illustration Forsberg has seen in a Masonic encyclopedia that depicts, among other things, an acacia tree and a castle.³⁰ That Smith says he awoke from his first vision lying on his back Forsberg compares to the raising of a Master Mason; while a passing reference to Smith’s being able to see into the bosom of the angel Moroni “may allude” to the bare breast of a Master Mason.³¹ When the Jaredite barges are tossed on the sea, Forsberg sees an allegory of “the hurt the Antimasonic Party caused men of Masonic sensibility.”³²

Forsberg’s parallelomania is unbridled. He reads as if Smith scattered the text willy-nilly with clues that would let Masons know he was one of them, yet Forsberg also wants to believe that these scattered clues add up to a decipherable program for Masonic reform. Ironically, Forsberg speaks of a Masonic penchant “to make more out of [resemblances] than perhaps is merited.”³³ Yet Forsberg does not recognize the same fault in himself. Despite the frequent qualifiers—all those may and might and could—the sheer volume of his suggestive analogies leaves Forsberg baffled that no one could see this. “It is hard to believe,” he marvels, “that not a single person knew (of) Smith’s (Masonic) history.” After all, “to any-

one who knew their Royal Arch Masonry," the connections couldn't have been clearer.³⁴ Forsberg is emboldened by his mound of analogies to speculate that Smith actually became a Mason not, as history has it, in 1842 but, secretly, in 1830. There is not a shred of corroborating evidence for this speculation apart from Forsberg's Masonic reinterpretation of the Book of Mormon—but how else to explain all those parallels?

The aspect of Forsberg's argument that Mormon readers may find most bizarre—and offensive—is his claim that Mormon polygamy was originally envisioned as an instrument of racial harmony through miscegenation. "According to the Book of Mormon," Forsberg informs readers, "a multiplicity of Indian and African women were to pass through the temple, joined in holy matrimony to a monogamous white male with a white spouse."³⁵ By thus "marry[ing] promiscuously outside their race," white Mormons would ensure that "women of color might conceive a whiter and whiter Indian/African bloodline."³⁶ This is sheer fantasy on Forsberg's part. The Book of Mormon has nothing at all to say about temple marriage, those passages in the book that might be construed as speaking to miscegenation prohibit it, and polygamy is mentioned only when a prophet condemns his people for the practice (Jacob 3:5). In a convoluted attempt to make Jacob's condemnation work in favor of his own thesis, Forsberg adds interpretative glosses in square brackets to the Book of Mormon text, so that, in his quotation, the commandment against polygamy reads: "they should have, save it were one wife [of their race?]; and concubines [of other races?] should they have none." On the basis of his own speculative glosses, Forsberg concludes that the Book of Mormon equates monogamy with racial endogamy, then goes on to argue for the inverse: equating polygamy with miscegenation.³⁷ This is an egregious but not atypical example of how Forsberg wrests from his sources the interpretation he desires.

Forsberg has a history of zealous and, by his own admission, obnoxious efforts to show Mormons that they have not properly understood their own religion. In an autobiography that he self-published four years before *Equal Rites*, Forsberg describes how during his mission, the period when he transitioned from orthodoxy into skepticism, he alienated his fellow missionaries by doing his best "to expose them for the frauds I believed most of them to be."³⁸ Teaching Sunday School following his mission, he "took particular delight in exposing the ignorance of certain high-ranking officials in the church who visited my class on occasion."³⁹

As he detached from Mormon activity and started doing what he calls “sensational” work in Mormon history, he was shocked by “the realization that Mormonism seemed not to want to hear the truth, or my version, anyway.”⁴⁰ In his autobiography, Forsberg casts himself as a martyr, “silenced” and “ostracised” by family and church authorities “for merely attempting to speak the truth.”⁴¹ Against this background, *Equal Rites* can be read as another step in Forsberg’s ongoing crusade to unveil the truth about Mormonism—“or my version, anyway.”

II

How were Columbia University Press and Randall Balmer, editor of the series of which *Equal Rites* is a part, persuaded to take Forsberg’s work seriously? Because Forsberg thanks them in his acknowledgements, we know the names of two of the reviewers who recommended publication; the third remains anonymous. One is John Brooke, author of *Refiner’s Fire*, who, like Forsberg, believes that Mormonism must be understood in relation to hermetic rather than conventionally Christian tradition. The second reviewer Forsberg thanks is Alfred Bush. An emeritus curator at Princeton University Library, where he spearheaded the development of Princeton’s Mormon collection, Bush has not published in the area of Mormon history.⁴² However, in 1957 he coauthored an unpublished historical paper with Klaus J. Hansen, now an emeritus professor at Queen’s University, who is Forsberg’s “Ph.D. supervisor, mentor, colleague, and friend.”⁴³ Bush also has the distinction of being one of the few Mormon reviewers who liked *Refiner’s Fire*.⁴⁴

The fact that Columbia selected Brooke as a reviewer, together with Bush’s enthusiasm for both Brooke’s and Forsberg’s hermetic interpretations of Mormonism, suggests to me that the perceived plausibility of Forsberg’s account of Mormon origins is connected to the positive reception of Brooke’s account, which received the Bancroft and SHEAR Prizes. That positive reception was generally confined to non-Mormons and heterodox Mormons; most Mormon reviewers panned *Refiner’s Fire*. Mormon reviewers’ complaints about Brooke’s book are similar to those I have lodged against Forsberg’s. An examination of attitudes toward Mormonism expressed in non-Mormons’ reviews of *Refiner’s Fire* leads me to theorize that Brooke’s account (and, by extension, Forsberg’s) seems plausible to non-Mormon readers because it coincides with their preexisting sense of Mormon exoticism.

Brooke links Mormonism to the Radical Reformation, a category that includes the Münsterites, Spiritualists, the Family of Love, Seekers, Ranters, Muggletonians, Quakers, Anne Hutchinson, and Roger Williams. Flowing into the Radical Reformation is a broadly defined hermetic tradition that includes folk magic, alchemy, cabala, Rosicrucianism, Masonry, and figures such as Paracelsus, John Dee, and Jacob Boehme. These, Brooke believes, not New England Puritanism, are the precursors to Mormonism. Brooke sets Mormonism at a distance from the “biblical primitivism [that] is a broad theme in American religious history” on the grounds that “the Mormon claim of a revealed restoration ideal has few parallels, and the combination of temple ritual, polygamous marriage, three-tiered heavens, the coequality of spirit and matter, and promise of godhood is essentially unique.”⁴⁵ The trajectory of Smith’s life, as Brooke traces it, runs from village conjurer to prophet to Christian-hermetic magus.⁴⁶

Orthodox Mormon scholars were displeased with *Refiner’s Fire*, especially after it received the Bancroft Prize.⁴⁷ In published reviews, LDS professors Richard Lyman Bushman, Philip L. Barlow, and Grant Underwood made similar critiques of Brooke’s work.⁴⁸ The three agreed that Brooke had “exaggerate[d] similarities” or “overstate[d] parallels” between Mormonism and hermeticism, which Bushman suggested were alike only to the extent that apples are like oranges.⁴⁹ They agreed also that Brooke had overlooked parallels to the Bible or Christian tradition that offered more instructive analogues to Mormon belief and practice. Barlow, for example, was bemused that Brooke would call healing a “magical” rather than a biblical practice.⁵⁰ Echoing assertions by LDS apologists, Barlow maintained that deification, which Brooke had cited as one of Mormonism’s “hermetic” doctrines, has echoes in orthodox Christian tradition from the church fathers to C. S. Lewis.⁵¹ Barlow and Bushman both cited the journals of early Mormon convert William McLellin, published around the same time as *Refiner’s Fire*, to demonstrate that Mormonism was understood by its first adherents in primitivist or millenarian terms that had ample precedent in other American Christian movements. Brooke, the LDS reviewers felt, had distorted Mormonism by treating peripheral notions like the mutuality of spirit and matter as if they were central to Mormon doctrine or by recasting Mormon beliefs—e.g., about eternal marriage—into alchemical terms alien to Smith’s teaching. Bushman observed that Brooke’s efforts to link early Saints to Radical Reformation

groups had little corroborating documentation, making the book “itself occult in requiring secret transmission of key ideas.”⁵² Other LDS reviewers—William Hamblin, Daniel Peterson, and George Mitton—made these same criticisms in a more impassioned tone and at much greater length.⁵³

Writing for non-LDS audiences, Barlow, Bushman, and Underwood were diplomatic in their critiques. But reviewers were blunter when writing for Mormon publications such as *BYU Studies* or the *FARMS Review of Books*. Reviews in these publications indicate that Mormons saw Brooke’s book as a piece with accusations of occultism long hurled at Mormonism by evangelical countercultists. Bushman had hinted at this perspective when he started his review for the *Journal of the Early Republic* by situating *Refiner’s Fire* in a history of polemics dating back to the very beginnings of Mormonism. Davis Bitton, writing for *BYU Studies*, was openly aggrieved.⁵⁴ Bitton read Brooke’s book as alleging that Mormonism was “rotten at the core,” something only “dunces” or a “dimwit” could believe. He predicted that *Refiner’s Fire* would be “greeted enthusiastically by anti-Mormons,” while he attributed the academy’s praise to Brooke’s having gotten “advance recommendations from scholars who should know their subject” and then reviews “by people whose mastery of the whole range of subject matter is lacking.” “Are intelligent readers and reviewers really going to let Brooke get away with such slovenliness?” he fumed.⁵⁵ Hamblin, Peterson, and Mitton, having compiled an exhaustive catalogue of Brooke’s factual and methodological offenses, implied that Cambridge University Press’s decision to publish *Refiner’s Fire* betokened a blind spot of religious prejudice: Could any Christian or Muslim, the reviewers asked, have gotten away with writing about Judaism the way Brooke wrote about Mormonism?⁵⁶ Professors at BYU, likely associated with FARMS, sent a letter chastising Cambridge University Press for publishing the book.⁵⁷ Louis Midgley, a BYU political science professor and an aggressive foe of historical work challenging Mormon orthodoxy, dubbed *Refiner’s Fire* “the execrable Brooke book,” and he publicly took to task non-Mormon historian Jan Shipps for having provided a complimentary blurb for the dust jacket.⁵⁸

Orthodox Mormons were bound to object to *Refiner’s Fire* if for no other reason than that Brooke’s is a naturalistic explanation of Mormon origins, one that attributes Smith’s teachings to environmental influences as opposed to tutelage by heavenly beings. Bitton lodged this anti-naturalist objection explicitly. In a standard apologetic move, he assured LDS

readers that any parallels between Smith's teachings and ideas afloat in his environment could be explained as signs either that fragments of truth had been preserved in the environment from previous gospel dispensations or that God had granted an independent, partial revelation of truth to individuals outside Mormonism.⁵⁹

Controversies over naturalism are a subtext to all Mormon history, especially work on Mormon origins. In 1981, when the LDS Church Historian's office under the direction of Leonard J. Arrington was producing, for the first time, Mormon histories consistent with professional canons, Apostle Boyd K. Packer gave a now-famous speech condemning histories of the faith that placed too much emphasis on natural rather than divine forces. For Packer, a history that neglected to show "the hand of the Lord in every hour and every moment of the Church from its beginning till now" could not, by definition, be historically accurate.⁶⁰ Packer's concerns, shared by other LDS leaders, led to the squelching of projected publications from the Church Historian's Office, increasingly tight control over Church archives, and Arrington's release as Church historian.⁶¹

Among Mormon historians, there has been much discussion about "faithful history," history that acknowledges, or at the very least does not contradict, a supernaturalist understanding of Mormon origins and faith in the divine powers at work in the movement.⁶² Richard Bushman has reflected on the obvious dilemmas faced by a professional trying to do this kind of history in *Believing History*, a collection of essays recently published by Columbia University Press.⁶³ As a naturalist account of Mormon origins, *Refiner's Fire* could never have hoped to receive more than qualified praise from Mormon reviewers. It was predictable that "faithful historians" would conclude that Brooke's radical revision of Mormon origins misunderstands or misrepresents their religion.

While I must emphasize that Brooke's account is nowhere near as fantastic as Forsberg's, orthodox Mormon reviewers are correct that Brooke exaggerates similarities to hermeticism and overlooks Mormonism's grounding in literal readings of the Bible. Brooke indeed seems "biblically illiterate" or "tone-deaf" when it comes to recognizing biblical parallels.⁶⁴ For example, Brooke reads an allusion to the signs that Mark 16 says will follow believers as white magic, and he wants to link a reference to Emma Smith as an "elect lady" to French Masonry, apparently unaware that the title is prominent in 2 John.⁶⁵ To use a term from Underwood's review, it is "parallelomania" for Brooke to conclude that Joseph Smith

was “fascinated” with metallurgy—and thus, we are to further believe, with alchemy—on the basis of a handful of references to mining in the Book of Mormon.⁶⁶ Brooke may be right to point to icons of the marriage of the alchemical king and queen as inspiration for Smith’s concepts of celestial marriage and the Heavenly Father and Mother.⁶⁷ But those concepts, as Smith developed them, hardly bear much resemblance to the alchemical drama of marriage, baptism/death, and resurrection.

Hermetic influences may have contributed to the imaginative matrix from which Mormonism springs; but hermetic connections before the Nauvoo period are weak or poorly documented, and Brooke overstates the case to say that Mormon doctrines are “opaque” unless understood as hermetic.⁶⁸ Mormonism emerged from an imaginative matrix primarily informed by a primitivist, millenarian reading of the Bible, supplemented by influences that can be broadly dubbed hermetic—folk magic, Masonry, interest in Egyptian mysteries—which gave Mormonism an increasingly distinctive cast as it developed during Smith’s life.

My reading of Mormon origins moves in the same general direction as those of Jan Shipps, Philip Barlow, and Grant Underwood, each of whom emphasizes Latter-day Saints’ engagement with the Bible. Also, my assessment of *Refiner’s Fire* and of why Mormon reviewers reacted so negatively to that book coincides in part with Shipps’s. Having been challenged by Louis Midgley to explain her praise for Brooke’s book, Shipps obliged in an essay that appeared in her 2000 collection, *Sojourner in the Promised Land*. Shipps broaches the problem of naturalism when she observes that “a general negative critique by Latter-day Saints is not surprising in view of Brooke’s explanation in strictly human terms of virtually everything the Saints hold sacred.” She observes also that “many LDS scholars seem to think the positive responses to Brooke’s work are latter-day expressions of prejudice against Mormonism, the academic equivalent of the accusation that Mormonism is a cult.”⁶⁹ She grants that this accusation may have some validity. But she goes on to suggest that non-Mormon historians hailed *Refiner’s Fire* because its emphasis on the Radical Reformation helped check the tendency to place mainline Protestants at the center of the American religious story. It was for that reason, Shipps claims, that she complimented Brooke’s book. As far as Brooke’s account of Mormonism is concerned, Shipps concedes that the book is unilluminating. She regrets that Brooke and Cambridge University Press did not seek a prepublication reading by an LDS scholar and agrees with reviewers

like Barlow that the first Mormons didn't need hermeticism to make them open to Smith's message, only "a literal reading of the Bible."⁷⁰ As Mormon reviewers did, Shippo cites the McLellin journals, which she coedited, as evidence against Brooke's thesis, although she also reminds LDS readers that Church leadership had not made the journals publicly available at the time Brooke was doing his research (a subtle reproach?).⁷¹

Shippo is too irenic in attributing non-Mormon historians' enthusiasm to what *Refiner's Fire* says about American religion in general and thus absolving them of buying into the book's flawed claims about Mormon origins. In fact, non-Mormon reviewers did not praise the book only for its work on the Radical Reformation in America, though certainly that was a prominent theme. Occasionally reviewers conceded that the book had "rare lapses" and "a few unsupported assertions" or that "at times, speculation fills gaps in the evidence."⁷² Still, non-LDS reviewers hailed *Refiner's Fire* for its revolutionary revision of Mormon origins. The book "forever changes our comprehension of Mormonism's development"; "radically alters our understanding of Mormon origins"; is "an insightful contribution to the controversy surrounding the origins of Mormonism."⁷³ Myron Marty and Paul Johnson described Brooke's work as a challenge to "cherished beliefs" that Mormon apologists would find difficult to refute.⁷⁴ But reviewers also praised Brooke for trying to move beyond the prophet/charlatan polemic that splits Mormon studies, implying that reviewers saw Brooke as balanced or sensitive.⁷⁵

Like Brooke, non-Mormon reviewers⁷⁶ characterize Mormon belief in ways that would ring false, or at least distorted, to Mormon ears. Rachelle Friedman follows Brooke in interpreting a Mormon temple ritual as bestowing salvation without grace and in viewing Mormon theology as having moved from a notion of "Adamic perfection" to traditional Christian beliefs about atonement.⁷⁷ It is true that Mormons have a history of emphasizing obedience and merit to a degree that has led evangelicals to accuse them of works righteousness, and it is true that Mormons have recently adopted an evangelical-style discourse about grace that they formerly dismissed as "sectarian."⁷⁸ Still, it is far from clear that any Mormon ritual is intended to confer salvation without grace; and "Adamic perfection," which Friedman places "at the center of Smith's thinking,"⁷⁹ does not figure in Mormon parlance. Paul Johnson claims that Smith promised followers "they could become gods who knew what Adam knew before the Fall." Whether Smith in fact equated deification with knowing

“what Adam knew before the Fall” is debatable; but Johnson paraphrases Smith thus in order to imply a parallel to Royal Arch Masons, who, he says, “spoke of Adam as a god who retained memories of divine knowledge after the Fall.”⁸⁰ Johnson’s paraphrase of Mormon belief conveys an impression of strong similarity to Masonry where primary texts would not readily yield such an impression.

Something similar occurs when Myron Marty says Smith taught that “by his own choice Adam left heaven to mate with nature.”⁸¹ Marty has in mind the Mormon belief that Adam willingly fell to experience mortality, but “to mate with nature” is a hermetic phrase alien to Mormon teaching. Simply erroneous summaries of Mormon beliefs are Kenneth Anderson’s claim that Mormons are pantheists (Anderson perhaps confuses pantheism with polytheism) or Curtis Johnson’s statement that Smith believed “all matter came from God’s substance.”⁸² Johnson misunderstands: He reads Smith’s teaching that all spirit is matter as if Smith also equated spirit with God, which Smith conspicuously did not do. The point of Smith’s statement is the opposite of what Johnson understands. Smith is not saying that matter is spiritual in origin; he is saying that spirit is material in substance.

Inaccurate or off-key characterizations of Mormon belief might be excused as an outsider’s understandable insensibility to nuance. But non-Mormon reviewers may find it easy to believe that Mormons subscribe to notions that sound odd when they approach the movement expecting to find something odd. Cohen opens his review by noting that Mormons have often been regarded as the “peculiar spawn of the nineteenth century.”⁸³ In his opening sentence, Paul Johnson calls the appearance of the Book of Mormon “one of the strangest stories in the strange history of American religion.”⁸⁴ Martin Marty compliments Brooke for his restraint—i.e., for not being a “Mormon-basher”—yet “often one wishes he would utter a ‘Hey! this Smith is really nutty!’ or a ‘Move over, Elijah!’ kind of signal.” Anyone who “is an eighth of an inch beyond Mormonism,” Marty continues, may be forgiven for thinking this “a story of self-delusion, other-delusion, folly, and even chicanery.”⁸⁵ Friedman sets her review of *Refiner’s Fire* in the context of periodic news stories focusing on sensational or outrageous aspects of Mormonism: the Mark Hofmann forgeries and murders, for instance, or the controversy over Mormons performing vicarious baptisms for Holocaust victims.⁸⁶

Mormon exoticism is linked to a perception that Mormonism dif-

fers fundamentally from traditional Christianity yet tries to pass itself off as something like evangelical Protestantism. Martin Marty is amazed that "Latter-day Saints see everything religious and cosmological in distinctive ways, unshared by their neighbors—and then plop themselves down inside the moderate and conservative forces of American society."⁸⁷ For Anderson, *Refiner's Fire* confirms that "beneath [Mormonism's] late twentieth-century Protestantism and Christianity, lies something very, very different, which is neither fundamentalist, nor conservative, nor Protestant nor, arguably, very Christian."⁸⁸ In the same vein, Cohen concludes that Mormonism owes "less to conventional Christianity than to occidental occultism"; it is "emphatically not a Protestant offshoot."⁸⁹ "Occultism" is a term certain to raise the hackles of Bitton and other orthodox Mormons worried about how *Refiner's Fire* might play into ongoing polemics about whether Mormonism is a Christian church or a cult.

Though reviewers compliment Brooke for having sidestepped the prophet/charlatan divide, some clearly see Mormonism as rooted in deception. Douglas Davies, often regarded by Mormon scholars as a sympathetic observer, writes that scholarship like Brooke's, connecting Mormonism to the magic culture, raises a problem for Mormons: how to assert the restoration of truth "amidst the matrix of trickery"? A "distinctive feature of general Mormon culture," Davies alleges, is that "the diviner is only a hair's breadth away from the false prophet, the sincere person from the charlatan."⁹⁰ Paul Johnson is convinced that early converts to Mormonism only gradually discovered what their religion really taught, that the organization of the church was "eerily secretive," and that this "aura of deception deepened over the remaining years of Smith's life." Mormonism, Johnson declares, is unique among American religions in that ultimately no one can sidestep the question of Smith's authenticity or fraud. Johnson does not hesitate to pronounce Smith's revelations "highly dubious," even debunked, citing the papyri purchased from Michael Chandler from which Smith claimed to have translated a lost book of Abraham but fragments of which, when they resurfaced in the twentieth century, turned out to be standard funerary texts.⁹¹ Myron Marty invokes the specter of a contemporary Mormon cover-up of the movement's dubious past when he sets *Refiner's Fire* against the backdrop of D. Michael Quinn's resignation from BYU after coming under fire for publishing about aspects of Mormon history that some Church leaders preferred remain unpublicized.⁹²

Expectations of Mormon exoticism by reviewers of *Refiner's Fire* correspond to similar expectations in the broader society, as reflected in journalistic accounts of Mormonism during and leading up to the 2002 Winter Games in Salt Lake City. Writers for *Newsweek*, the *New Yorker*, and the *Economist* commented with an air of surprise on how normal Mormons seemed—unusually conservative, but not unlike adherents of any Christian church.⁹³ Yet looks prove deceiving. As the kicker heading for Kenneth Woodward's *Newsweek* article declares: Mormonism "is looking more Christian. But it's still a different world."⁹⁴ The invisible difference consists of certain Mormon beliefs—what the *Economist* calls "startling departures from Christian orthodoxy."⁹⁵ Richard and Joan Ostling had made the same point in their 1999 primer, *Mormon America*. Politically and socially, Mormons have assimilated into the mainstream, but their beliefs still set them apart.⁹⁶ Among Mormonism's departures from Christian orthodoxy, all the journalists cited thus far mention deification, plurality of gods, the Heavenly Mother, and eternal progression. The *Economist* compares Mormon belief in eternal progression to Eastern religion, apparently thinking of reincarnation.⁹⁷ To readers of the *New Yorker*, Lawrence Wright passes on an additional bit of Mormon esoterica that Church President Gordon B. Hinckley volunteered during an interview: Brigham Young's eccentric teaching (shelved following his death) that Adam is God the Father.⁹⁸ These journalists' summations of Mormon belief suggest that, despite a conventional Christian appearance, Mormons are still essentially Other.

A corollary to the theme of continuing Mormon Otherness beneath a less alien façade is secretiveness, the intimation that Mormons are hiding something. The *Economist* describes the LDS Church as run by "small groups of men who meet in secret."⁹⁹ Mormons as a people are said to be "mysterious and clannish."¹⁰⁰ The "young, well-scrubbed, and ingratiating religion" ready to greet visitors for the 2002 Games has skeletons in its closet: the 1857 Mountain Meadows Massacre, for instance, or contemporary polygamists such as Tom Green, who cite early Mormon prophets to justify the practice.¹⁰¹ Wright describes how during his interview with Hinckley, three Church bureaucrats placed tape recorders alongside his own. Whether Wright means it to sound menacing or amusing, the anecdote suggests a Church preoccupied with controlling information.¹⁰² Efforts by the LDS Church to control its history and its intellectuals were covered in two chapters of the Ostlings' *Mormon America* and were

brought to the attention of academic audiences by a 2002 *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, which quoted Leonard Arrington on Church leaders' desire for a history written by public relations writers.¹⁰³ Richard John Neuhaus, writing in *First Things* in March 2000, alluded to LDS efforts to "sanitize" their history—efforts he thought were doomed to fail, as "the sanitized story . . . tries to hide so much that cannot be hidden."¹⁰⁴ The *New Yorker*, the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and *First Things* all named the Chandler papyri as an example of hard evidence belying LDS claims, as Paul Johnson had done in his review of *Refiner's Fire*.¹⁰⁵ Neuhaus, indeed, characterized Mormon credence in the Book of Abraham as "a corrosive tradition of make-believe" and the Book of Mormon as "the product of fantasy and fabrication." Despite having a number of LDS subscribers to his journal and a Mormon sitting on the editorial advisory board, Neuhaus did not scruple to wonder aloud how Mormons could not see through the nonsense: "Not to put too fine a point on it, the founding stories and doctrines of Mormonism appear to the outsider as a bizarre phantasmagoria of fevered religious imagination not untouched by perverse genius."¹⁰⁶

Terryl Givens has argued that contemporary representations of Mormonism as secretive or sinister replicate "old stereotypes and anxieties" from the nineteenth century. He makes the same argument about preoccupation with Mormon growth and political influence—a motif, it turns out, in Olympic media coverage of Mormonism, as well as in Martin Marty's review of *Refiner's Fire*.¹⁰⁷ Accusing their critics of perpetuating nineteenth-century persecution is a typical move for orthodox LDS scholars, especially those who see themselves as defenders of the faith.¹⁰⁸ I am not inclined to be so militant. But it is apparent that the writers I have examined—journalists and scholars—tend to regard Mormonism as an Other trying to pass as Like. I theorize that these writers approach Mormonism with exotic expectations already in place, leading them to create representations of the movement that are sometimes inaccurate but that in any case serve to reinforce Mormon difference. For these writers, it is a given that Mormonism is an essentially non-Christian, or at least not traditionally Christian, movement trying either to cover up this fact or to remake itself in the image of evangelical Protestantism.

Mormons would deny this portrayal of their movement. Clearly Mormons are worried about their public image and therefore downplay aspects of their past, including past teachings that are likely to provoke

controversy, especially when contemporary Mormons regard those teachings as speculative or marginal to the essence of the faith. It is also clear that Mormons are interested in presenting themselves as adherents of a Christian faith who share significant common ground with Christians of other denominational stripes. But Mormons see this activity as clarifying the nature of their faith, not transforming it; they certainly do not see themselves as calculated or disingenuous. And Mormons are, as ever, eager to proclaim the distinctive, saving message of the restored gospel, though they may disagree with journalists and others about what the key distinctions of that message are. That is, Mormons would probably prefer to talk about the Book of Mormon (which they understand as central to their faith) than about how God became God (which Mormons have come to see as a speculative or marginal feature).

Whether or not one believes that Mormons are trying to remake their faith in the direction of traditional Christianity—the implication being that they started out as, or still are at core, something very different—the fact that Mormons are *perceived* thus creates a climate that lends plausibility to accounts like *Refiner's Fire*. When Brooke tells readers that Mormonism's origins lie not in the mainstream of Christian tradition but in a hermetic fringe, he tells them what they already suspected: that behind the Mormon Tabernacle Choir singing patriotic songs and Protestant hymns, behind that giant replica of Thorvaldsen's *Christus* on Temple Square, something odd is concealed, something decisively outside the Christian mainstream, something so strange that Mormons themselves don't know what to make of it. Brooke professes to throw light on the mystery. And then Forsberg steps to the microphone, at Brooke's invitation, to announce an incredible exposé of his own.

III

Unfortunately, orthodox Mormons are not well positioned to persuade others of the problems with Brooke's and Forsberg's work. It may be disappointing, but it is also not surprising that Cambridge University Press did not submit Brooke's manuscript to an LDS reviewer, nor would it be hard to believe that Columbia University Press did not send Forsberg's manuscript to any orthodox LDS reviewer.¹⁰⁹ The reviews of *Refiner's Fire* and the journalistic accounts of Mormonism examined above reveal a widely disseminated perception that Mormons are in denial about their history—the Chandler papyri, for instance. This perception

was no doubt reinforced by national media coverage of the Mark Hofmann forgeries in the mid-1980s or the “purge” of prominent Mormon intellectuals in the early 1990s. Brooke invokes this perception when he remarks, in the preface to *Refiner's Fire*: “Quite obviously, this is not a traditional Mormon history, for I am not a Mormon historian”; the implication appears to be that “obviously” a Mormon historian would produce a history in step with Mormon tradition.¹¹⁰

Evangelical historian Mark Noll, known for defending religious perspectives in history, nevertheless finds fault with “faithful” Mormon history as represented by Richard Bushman's *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (published by University of Illinois Press but originally commissioned by the LDS Church Historian's office). Even for the largely sympathetic Noll, Bushman's work smacks too much of a providentialism where “events of religious history are regarded exclusively as transcendent and, because transcendent, immune to the techniques of the social sciences.”¹¹¹

In short, “faithful” Mormon historians have a credibility problem, even those who have published well-reviewed works on Mormon history through university presses. Consequently, despite accurate critiques of *Refiner's Fire* by Mormon reviewers like Philip Barlow, Grant Underwood, and Columbia's own Richard Bushman, John Brooke remains such an authority on Mormon origins that Columbia University Press solicited and accepted his recommendation on Forsberg's manuscript. It surely does not help matters that some Mormon scholars, specifically those associated with FARMS, have a reputation for writing “extended, scathing, and downright ugly reviews” of books that challenge orthodox accounts of Mormon history.¹¹² The staff at Cambridge University Press may be forgiven for thinking that the BYU professors who chewed them out for publishing Brooke's book are just cranks. And yet Brooke's work was flawed, more deeply than anyone saw except sometimes cranky orthodox Mormon reviewers and, perhaps belatedly, Jan Shippo. Whether non-Mormon reviewers will see through Forsberg's work remains to be seen.

This state of affairs is frustrating. Even if a scholarly consensus emerges that is dismissive of *Equal Rites*, the book's publication on John Brooke's recommendation still indicates how great the gap is between the horizons of plausibility that different camps of scholars bring to the study of Mormonism. Hermetic readings of Mormonism appeal to non-Mormon scholars who approach the movement with exotic expectations;

these readings appeal also to heterodox Mormons whose own religious convictions run in hermetic directions.¹¹³ Meanwhile, orthodox Mormons are predisposed to find problems in any account of Mormon origins that jostles their faith's historical truth claims. Hermetic readings are particularly offensive to the orthodox at a time when Mormons labor to persuade the public they are Christian—"not weird," as Gordon B. Hinckley has put it.¹¹⁴ All together, these circumstances constrain the possibility of constructive scholarly conversations about Mormon history. Granted that in any scholarly discourse community there will be competing camps divided by theoretical, methodological, or other interpretive preferences; but scholars working in Mormon history have such discrete horizons of plausibility that it hardly makes sense to speak of a single discourse community. Mormon history is an arena where scholars in different camps speak past each other, not to each other. Credence in Brooke's misreading of Mormonism and the publication of Forsberg's are symptoms of this disconnect.

I am not pleading for everyone to get along. If anything, my autobiography would incline me to call Mormon historians to abandon "faithful history" in favor of well-informed, naturalistic interpretations. Mormon historians are unlikely to do that. And for precisely that reason, historians are justified in suspecting orthodox Mormon colleagues of apologetic inclinations: of producing histories that serve religious interests and that reflect a distinctively Mormon supernaturalist worldview.¹¹⁵ On the other hand, I share the frustration of the orthodox at seeing Mormon belief misrepresented or misconstrued. I tend to raise a skeptical eyebrow at Mormon allegations of anti-Mormon prejudice in the academy, but I also have to raise a brow at Martin Marty's willingness to hoot in print at that nutty Joseph Smith.

While I am troubled by the gulf between orthodox Mormons and others in Mormon history and am irked to see absurdities about Mormonism appearing under the imprint of a university press, it is difficult to envision a solution. As long as orthodox Mormon scholars remain committed to "faithful history"—a commitment orthodox Mormons must hold by definition—they will perpetuate a climate in which their non-Mormon colleagues regard them with more or less polite suspicion. That climate facilitates the publication of a book like *Equal Rites*. It is striking that Columbia University Press produced both *Equal Rites* and *Believing History*, Richard Bushman's reflections on being a "faithful" Mormon historian, in the

same year. Mormon readers may see the publication of *Believing History* as a sign that the academy is coming to take “faithful history” seriously, and they may be right in the sense that the publication indicates sensitivity to religious pluralism. But Bushman’s essays also reinforce the perception that orthodox Mormon historians have an idiosyncratic agenda. *Equal Rites*, fantastic though it is, has the advantage of looking like history as usual: a naturalistic account of Mormon origins moving in a direction signaled some years earlier by an award-winning “regular” historian. As a token of religious diversity, Bushman may have his colleagues’ courteous attention; but Brooke’s work on Mormonism, not Bushman’s, won the Bancroft Prize.¹¹⁶ And that worked out well for Forsberg.

Notes

1. Scott McLemee, “Latter-day Studies,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 22, 2002, A-14.

2. Eric A. Eliason, ed., *Mormons and Mormonism: An Introduction to an American World Religion* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001); Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture that Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Sarah Barringer Gordon, *The Mormon Question: Polygamy and Constitutional Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Douglas Davies, *An Introduction to Mormonism* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Kathleen Flake, *The Politics of American Religious Identity: The Seating of Senator Reed Smoot, Mormon Apostle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

3. Todd Hollingshead, “Yale Hosting Mormon Conference,” *BYU NewsNet*, March 4, 2003, retrieved on December 23, 2004, from <http://newsnet.byu.edu/story.cfm/42757>.

4. At the time he wrote the book, Forsberg was an adjunct faculty member in the History Department, Queen’s College, Kingston, Ontario. According to biographical information posted at Columbia University Press’s website, he is now teaching in Kyrgyzstan. Retrieved on December 23, 2004, from <http://www.ccnmtl.columbia.edu/cu/cup/catalog/data/023112/0231126409.HTM>.

5. Arturo de Hoyos, “Two Wrongs Don’t Make a Rite,” Review of *Equal Rites*, by Clyde R. Forsberg Jr., *The Scottish Rite Journal*, n.d., retrieved on December 23, 2004, from <http://www.srmason-sj.org/web/journal-files/Issues/br-new.htm>; Newell G. Bringhurst, review of *Equal Rites*, by Clyde R. Forsberg Jr., *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 24 (2004): 180.

6. Michael Drosnin, *The Bible Code* (New York: Touchstone, 1997); Margaret Starbird, *The Woman with the Alabaster Jar: Mary Magdalen and the Holy Grail* (Santa Fe, N.M.: Bear & Co., 1993).

7. John L. Brooke, *The Refiner's Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644–1844* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

8. Throughout this paper, I use “orthodox” Mormon in preference to the more common, but loaded, terms “faithful” Mormon or “believing” Mormon. Elsewhere, I have defined Mormon orthodoxy as belief in the historicity of LDS faith claims, in the literal reality of the plan of salvation, in the exclusive authority of the LDS Church, and in the obedience owed to the LDS hierarchy. John-Charles Duffy, “Defending the Kingdom, Rethinking the Faith: How Apologetics Is Reshaping Mormon Orthodoxy,” *Sunstone*, No. 132 (May 2004): 33.

9. Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980), 327.

10. Jane Tompkins, “‘Indians’: Textualism, Morality, and the Problem of History,” *Critical Inquiry* 13 (1986–87): 116. This does not mean, Fish and Tompkins go on to argue, that all efforts at interpretation must be swallowed up in the perspectivist truism that we can never know what a text really means or what really happened in history. Certainly Fish and Tompkins’s theory renders it unpersuasive to argue against an interpretation on the grounds of its being perspectival or invested per se (since the argument would immediately turn against the one making it). But this in turn means that “arguments about ‘what happened’ have to proceed much as they did before post-structuralism broke in with all its talk about language-based reality and culturally produced knowledge. Reasons must be given, evidence adduced, authorities cited, analogies drawn” (118). Hence, though I recognize the investedness of my own take on Mormon history, I will nevertheless argue against Forsberg’s interpretation on grounds that I hope readers will find persuasive.

11. Michael W. Homer, “‘Similarity of Priesthood in Masonry’: The Relationship between Freemasonry and Mormonism,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 27, no. 3 (Fall 1994): 26–42.

12. Claims that the Book of Mormon contains anti-Masonic rhetoric go back to 1831. Homer, “Similarity of Priesthood in Masonry,” 90. For a modern example, see Dan Vogel, “Mormonism’s ‘AntiMasonick Bible,’” *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 9 (1989): 17–30. For examples of orthodox Mormons who resist such readings, see Richard Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 128–31; Daniel C. Peterson, “Notes on ‘Gadianton Masonry,’” in *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, edited by Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book/Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1990), 146–224.

13. The 1826 disappearance of William Morgan was widely interpreted as a Masonic execution, since Morgan had been preparing an exposé of Masonic ritual. The incident sparked an anti-Masonic furor that decimated American lodges

through the 1830s. Mark C. Carnes, *Secret Ritual and Manhood in Victorian America* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989), 24–25; Clyde R. Forsberg Jr., *Equal Rites: The Book of Mormon, Masonry, Gender, and American Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 17–21; Homer, “Similarity of Priesthood in Masonry,” 12–14.

14. Forsberg, *Equal Rites*, xxii, xvii; parentheses his.

15. *Ibid.*, 91.

16. *Ibid.*, 115.

17. *Ibid.*, 86–88.

18. Forsberg offers circumstantial evidence that Smith’s father may also have been a Mason. *Ibid.*, 46–47.

19. Homer, “Similarity of Priesthood in Masonry,” 17–18, 89–90; Brooke, *The Refiner’s Fire*, 157–59.

20. Jan Shipps, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 58, has compared Smith’s unearthing of the golden plates to the discovery of the lost book of the law during Josiah’s restoration of Solomon’s temple. Given my sense of Mormonism as growing primarily out of a literalistic engagement with the Bible, I prefer to seek biblical origins for Mormon motifs before looking to extrabiblical sources. Nevertheless, compared to Josiah’s temple scroll, I find the Masonic golden plate a more satisfying, because more similar, prototype for Smith’s plates.

21. Forsberg, *Equal Rites*, 44.

22. John M. Allegro, *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross: A Study of the Nature and Origins of Christianity within the Fertility Cults of the Ancient Near East* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1970); Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Doubleday, 2003).

23. Umberto Eco, *Foucault’s Pendulum*, translated by William Weaver (New York: Ballantine Books, 1990), 314.

24. *Ibid.*, 513.

25. Quoted (and translated into English) in Eco, *Foucault’s Pendulum*, 383. For the French original, see Michel Lamy, *Jules Verne, initié et initiateur: Le clé du secret de Rennes-le-Château et le trésor des rois de France* (Paris: Payot, 1984), 237–38.

26. Forsberg, *Equal Rites*, 34–35.

27. *Ibid.*, 41.

28. *Ibid.*, 50, 74, 120.

29. *Ibid.*, 67, 94.

30. *Ibid.*, 70.

31. *Ibid.*, 58, 62.

32. *Ibid.*, 76.

33. *Ibid.*, 114.

34. *Ibid.*, 78; parentheses his.

35. Ibid., 224.

36. Ibid., xix.

37. Ibid., 214. The only text that could be reasonably construed as support for Forsberg's interracial polygamy thesis is a statement from an unpublished revelation of Smith's instructing missionaries to take Indian wives so that their posterity could become white. This revelation was not acted upon, but Forsberg makes as much of it as he can. *Equal Rites*, 218. Forsberg's source for this obscure text is a quotation used by his mentor, Klaus Hansen, in *Mormonism and the American Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981). Forsberg follows closely—to the point of flirting with plagiarism—Hansen's argument that “within the context of the 1830s—at a time when in the eyes of most Americans the only good Indian was a dead Indian—such an attempt at racial elevation was rather daring.” Hansen, *Mormonism and the American Experience*, 182. Compare Forsberg, *Equal Rites*, xix: “At a time when most people believed that the only good Indian was a dead Indian,” the Mormon plan to whiten the Indians through intermarriage “was daring.” Hansen says nothing about a plan for interracial polygamy; that notion is Forsberg's alone.

38. Clyde R. Forsberg Jr., *All the King's Horses and All the King's Men: Love, Alienation and “Reconciliation” in a Big, BIG Mormon Family* (N.p.: Xlibris, 2000), 91–92.

39. Ibid., 108. Apropos to his use of evidence in *Equal Rites*, Forsberg confesses that as a Sunday School teacher, he used that position “to promote my own peculiar beliefs. . . . I found myself purloining arguments from orthodox Protestant sources and distorting them to suit my Mormon apologetical agenda.”

40. Ibid., 126, 138.

41. Ibid., 135. Forsberg refers here not only to truth about Mormon history but also to the truth about the abuse he alleges he and his thirteen siblings suffered at home as a result of his parents having been warped by LDS Church teachings on patriarchy and the necessity of large families. Though space does not permit an extended analysis here, there is a suggestive parallel between the gender battle at the heart of *Equal Rites* (ineffectual Masonic patriarchy versus emasculating Evangelical feminism) and Forsberg's own family dynamics as described in his autobiography (ineffectual patriarchal father, tyrannical feminist mother). In addition, a musical drama based on his autobiography reveals Forsberg's conviction that the LDS Church promoted “big families as the last line of defense . . . against the ‘extinction’ of the Anglo-Saxon race.” Forsberg's claims in *Equal Rites* about polygamy and miscegenation should probably be understood in light of this latter conviction, though how the two intersect is not immediately apparent. “JazzTheater at NAC Elgin Room,” online announcement of a performance of “Not Black or White: The Lost Recordings,” by Clyde R. Forsberg Jr., retrieved on December 23, 2004, from <http://ottawa-blues-jazz.ncf.ca/jazthtr.html>. A more

extensive evaluation of Forsberg's scholarly habits should also consider the epilogue of his published autobiography, where he acknowledges having misinterpreted his own family history yet justifies his decision to publish the faulty interpretation anyway. In a highly confessional moment, Forsberg wonders aloud if he is mentally ill and describes himself as living "on the edge of madness." *All the King's Horses*, 182–84.

42. I make this statement after consulting the monumental bibliography by James B. Allen, Ronald W. Walker, and David J. Whittaker, *Studies in Mormon History, 1830–1997: An Indexed Bibliography* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000). Bush has published an introduction to Princeton's Mormon Americana collection, but that work is not historical. Alfred Bush, "Mormon Americana at Princeton University," in *Mormon Americana: A Guide to Sources and Collections in the United States*, edited by David J. Whittaker (Provo, Utah: BYU Studies, 1995), 281–95.

43. Forsberg, *Equal Rites*, xxiii. The unpublished paper is Klaus J. Hansen and Alfred Bush, "Notes towards a Definition of the Council of Fifty," 1957, Klaus J. Hansen Papers, Manuscripts Division, Marriott Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City.

44. Jan Shippo, "Thoughts about the Academic Community's Response to John Brooke's *The Refiner's Fire*," in her *Sojourner in the Promised Land: Forty Years among the Mormons* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 204. Forsberg's mentor, Klaus Hansen, has also recently written in defense of Brooke's book: Klaus J. Hansen, "Jan Shippo among the Mormons," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 37, no. 3 (Fall 2004): 23–24. Another positive review of *The Refiner's Fire* was written by Lance Owens, a Latter-day Saint turned Gnostic priest and author of an award-winning *Dialogue* article drawing parallels between Smith's thought and cabala. Lance S. Owens, Review of *The Refiner's Fire*, by John L. Brooke, *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 27, no. 4 (Winter 1994): 187–91. Owens is one of a subset of Mormons or former Mormons who elaborate interpretations of the faith that could be called hermetic given their focus on magic or the *hieros gamos*, the sacred marriage of the archetypal male and female. In *The Refiner's Fire*, Brooke identifies as other members of this subset Maxine Hanks, D. Michael Quinn, and Paul J. Toscano. These individuals have been excommunicated from the LDS Church; Brooke interprets the excommunications as an effort by Church leaders to suppress Mormonism's hermetic elements. *The Refiner's Fire*, 305. Because I am interested in the contrast between orthodox Mormon and non-Mormon historians, I have little to say about the Mormon hermeticists aside from noting their presence in the constellation of competing readings of Mormonism.

45. Brooke, *The Refiner's Fire*, xv–xvi.

46. *Ibid.*, 4.

47. John W. Welch, "Two Reviews: Mormonism and the Hermetic World View," editor's preface to Reviews of *The Refiner's Fire*, by John L. Brooke, *BYU Studies* 34, no. 4 (1994-95): 165.

48. Richard Bushman, "The Mysteries of Mormonism," Review of *The Refiner's Fire*, by John L. Brooke, *Journal of the Early Republic* 15 (1995): 501-8; Philip L. Barlow, "Decoding Mormonism," Review of *The Refiner's Fire*, by John L. Brooke, *Christian Century*, January 17, 1996, 52-55; Grant Underwood, Review of *The Refiner's Fire*, by John L. Brooke, *Pacific Historical Review* 65 (1996): 323-24. Bushman was Gouverneur Morris Professor of History at Columbia University and winner of a 1968 Bancroft Prize for his work on colonial New England. Barlow was an associate professor of theological studies at Hanover College and author of *Mormons and the Bible: The Place of the Latter-day Saints in American Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991). Underwood was teaching at BYU-Hawaii and had recently published *The Millenarian World of Early Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993).

49. Underwood, Review, 323; Barlow, "Decoding Mormonism," 53; Bushman, "Mysteries of Mormonism," 504.

50. Barlow, "Decoding Mormonism," 53; cf. Underwood, Review, 323.

51. Barlow, "Decoding Mormonism," 54.

52. Bushman, "Mysteries of Mormonism," 504.

53. William J. Hamblin, Daniel C. Peterson, and George L. Mitton, "Mormon in the Fiery Furnace, Or Loftes Tryk Goes to Cambridge," Review of *The Refiner's Fire*, by John L. Brooke, *FARMS Review of Books* 6, no. 2 (1994): 3-58, retrieved on December 23, 2004, from <http://farms.byu.edu/display.php?table=review&id=151>; William J. Hamblin, Daniel C. Peterson, and George L. Mitton, Review of *The Refiner's Fire*, by John L. Brooke, *BYU Studies* 34, no. 4 (1994-95): 167-81. Hamblin and Peterson were associate professors at BYU, Hamblin in history and Peterson in Near Eastern languages. Mitton was described as "retired now from a career in education and public administration."

54. Davis Bitton, Review of *The Refiner's Fire*, by John L. Brooke, *BYU Studies* 34, no. 4 (1994-95): 182-92. Bitton was a professor of history at the University of Utah and one of two former assistant Church historians in the LDS Historical Department under Leonard Arrington, the dean of Mormon history.

55. *Ibid.*, 182, 186, 191.

56. Hamblin, Peterson, and Mitton, "Mormon in the Fiery Furnace."

57. For references to this letter, see Barlow, "Decoding Mormonism," 53; Shipp, "Thoughts about the Academic Community's Response," 214 note 8.

58. Louis Midgley, "The Shipp Odyssey in Retrospect," Review of *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition*, by Jan Shipp, *FARMS Review of Books* 7, no. 2 (1995): 219-52; retrieved on December 23, 2004, from <http://farms.byu.edu/display.php?table=review&id=194>.

59. Bitton, Review, 184–85.

60. Boyd K. Packer, "The Mantle Is Far, Far Greater Than the Intellect," *BYU Studies* 21, no. 3 (Summer 1981): 262.

61. Leonard J. Arrington, *Adventures of a Church Historian* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998).

62. See, for example, the essays in *Faithful History: Essays on Writing Mormon History*, edited by George D. Smith (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992).

63. Richard L. Bushman, *Believing History: Latter-day Saint Essays*, edited by Reid L. Neilson and Jed Woodworth (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

64. The quoted phrases come, respectively, from Hamblin, Peterson, and Mitton, "Mormon in the Fiery Furnace," and Shipps, "Thoughts on the Academic Community's Response," 210.

65. Brooke, *The Refiner's Fire*, 72, 210.

66. Underwood, Review, 323; Brooke, *The Refiner's Fire*, 159–60.

67. Brooke, *The Refiner's Fire*, 9, 257–58.

68. *Ibid.*, 278.

69. Shipps, "Thoughts on the Academic Community's Response," 205–6.

70. *Ibid.*, 211.

71. *Ibid.*, 212–13.

72. Charles L. Cohen, Review of *The Refiner's Fire*, by John L. Brooke, *William and Mary Quarterly* 53 (1996): 214–15; Curtis D. Johnson, Review of *The Refiner's Fire*, by John L. Brooke, *Journal of American History* 82 (1995): 685.

73. Cohen, Review, 214; Johnson, Review, 684; George M. Eberhart, Review of *The Refiner's Fire*, by John L. Brooke, *College and Research Libraries News*, January 1995, 37.

74. Myron Marty, Review of *The Refiner's Fire*, by John L. Brooke, *Journal of Religion* 76 (1996): 648; Paul Johnson, "The Alchemist," Review of *The Refiner's Fire*, by John L. Brooke, *New Republic*, June 12, 1995, 46–48.

75. Curtis Johnson, Review, 684; Paul Johnson, "The Alchemist," 47–48; Martin Marty, "Saints for These Latter Days," Review of *The Refiner's Fire*, by John L. Brooke, *Commonweal*, March 10, 1995, 26.

76. The category "non-Mormon reviewers" lumps together a great variety of scholars subscribing to diverse worldviews, religious and otherwise. What allows these scholars to be placed in the same category is their disbelief in Mormon orthodoxy, which sharply distinguishes them from the majority of Mormons doing Mormon studies. Because I am concerned about the gap between orthodox Mormons' and non-Mormons' ideas about what could have "actually happened" in history and how this gap impacts Mormon studies as a field, I will treat the non-Mormon reviewers as a bloc, without trying to identify nuances in their respective readings of Mormonism. As part of another research project, I am work-

ing on mapping non-Mormon representations of Mormonism in scholarship with greater complexity than I have done for the purposes of this essay.

77. Rachelle E. Friedman, Review of *The Refiner's Fire*, by John L. Brooke, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 27 (1996): 329–31.

78. BYU religion professor Stephen E. Robinson popularized discourse about grace among Mormons in the early 1990s, principally through his *Believing Christ: The Parable of the Bicycle and Other Good News* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992). On Mormons having formerly rejected such discourse because of its association with apostate “sectarian” Christianity, see Joseph Fielding McConkie, *Answers: Straightforward Answers to Tough Gospel Questions* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1998), 59–60. Brooke's suggestion that early Mormons rejected salvation by grace struck a raw nerve among Mormon reviewers of *The Refiner's Fire*, probably because it echoed evangelical polemics against Mormonism. Hamblin, Peterson, and Mitton dedicate a whole section of their fifty-five-page review to rebutting Brooke on this point. “Mormon in the Fiery Furnace,” under “Primary Sources and the Atonement: A Test Case.” See also Bitton, Review, 189, who reads Brooke as repeating accusations that Mormons are Pelagians.

79. Friedman, Review, 330.

80. Paul Johnson, “The Alchemist,” 46.

81. Myron Marty, Review, 648.

82. Kenneth Anderson, “The Magi of the Great Salt Lake,” Review of *The Refiner's Fire*, by John L. Brooke, *Times Literary Supplement*, March 24, 1995, 11; Curtis Johnson, Review, 684.

83. Cohen, Review, 213.

84. Paul Johnson, “The Alchemist,” 46.

85. Martin Marty, “Saints for These Latter Days,” 26–27.

86. Friedman, Review, 329–30.

87. Martin Marty, “Saints for These Latter Days,” 27.

88. Anderson, “Magi of the Great Salt Lake,” 10.

89. Cohen, Review, 215.

90. Douglas Davies, review of *The Refiner's Fire*, by John L. Brooke, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 49, no. 2 (1996): 237.

91. Paul Johnson, “The Alchemist,” 46, 48.

92. Myron Marty, Review, 648.

93. Kenneth L. Woodward, “A Mormon Moment,” *Newsweek*, September 10, 2001, 44–51; Lawrence Wright, “Lives of the Saints,” *New Yorker*, January 21, 2002, 40–57; “Church of the West,” *Economist*, February 9, 2002, 25–26.

94. Woodward, “A Mormon Moment,” 44.

95. “Church of the West,” 26.

96. Richard N. Ostling and Joan K. Ostling, *Mormon America: The Power and the Promise* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999), 112.

97. "Church of the West," 26.

98. Wright, "Lives of the Saints," 44. According to Wright, Hinckley professed not to know what Brigham Young was talking about or to be worried about it. Hinckley was perhaps trying to defuse, but likely reinforced, the perception that Mormons are in retreat from past teachings.

99. "Church of the West," 26.

100. Woodward, "A Mormon Moment," 46.

101. Wright, "Lives of the Saints," 40, 43–46, 54–56.

102. *Ibid.*, 43.

103. Ostling and Ostling, *Mormon America*, chaps. 15, 21; McLemee, "Latter-day Studies," A16.

104. Richard John Neuhaus, "Is Mormonism Christian?" *First Things*, March 2000, 100.

105. Wright, "Lives of the Saints," 52–53; McLemee, "Latter-day Studies," A15–16; Neuhaus, "Is Mormonism Christian?" 99.

106. Neuhaus, "Is Mormonism Christian?" 99. Bruce C. Hafen sat on *First Things*'s editorial advisory board through the 1990s. His name was removed from the list of board members after September 2000, four years after Hafen was called to the First Quorum of Seventy.

107. Terry L. Givens, *The Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myths, and the Construction of Heresy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 155–56. In the journalistic coverage of Mormonism around the Olympics, an emphasis on Mormon growth or political dominance served as a handy hook. The *Economist* ("Church of the West," 25) cited sociologist Rodney Stark's prediction that Mormons would grow to 50 million by 2040, while the *New Yorker* (Wright, "Lives of the Saints," 42) quoted Harold Bloom's speculation that Mormon numbers and wealth could someday make "governing our democracy . . . impossible without Mormon cooperation." Mormon political influence was also a focus in *Newsweek* (Woodward, "A Mormon Moment," 46) and the *Economist*, though the latter concluded that fears over Mormon growth and theocracy are "exaggerated" ("Church of the West," 26). Martin Marty employed this same frame for his review of *The Refiner's Fire*, citing Mormonism's growth in contrast to the decline of mainline churches and Mormon expansion outside the Great Basin as facts that make it "increasingly urgent for the people they call Gentiles to understand them" ("Saints for These Latter Days," 26).

108. Duffy, "Defending the Kingdom," 25, 44 note 33.

109. Alfred Bush's enthusiasm for *The Refiner's Fire* strongly suggests that he has left Mormon orthodoxy for naturalism; he appears, in any case, thoroughly disengaged from the Mormon intellectual world (as represented by *Dialogue*, *Sunstone*, the Mormon History Association, etc.). It is unlikely that the anonymous third reviewer was orthodox, since I cannot imagine that an ortho-

dox Mormon would endorse Forsberg's speculative, sensationalistic revision of his or her faith.

110. Brooke, *The Refiner's Fire*, xvi.

111. Mark A. Noll, "'And the Lion Shall Lie Down with the Lamb': The Social Sciences and Religious History," *Fides et Historia* 20, no. 3 (October 1988): 20.

112. Shipps, "Thoughts on the Academic Community's Response," 205.

113. On Mormon hermeticists, see note 44.

114. Quoted in Woodward, "A Mormon Moment," 48.

115. The situation is complex, though. Interpretations of Mormonism that emphasize its biblical roots—such as Barlow's and Underwood's—may serve apologetic ends to the degree they present Mormons as recognizably Christian. Nevertheless, I remain convinced that these scholars' interpretations are more plausible than Brooke's and Forsberg's hermetic ones.

116. As mentioned earlier (note 48), Bushman won a Bancroft Prize in 1968 for work outside Mormon history.