

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### *Tolerance for "Cultural Mormons"*

I appreciate William J. Hamblin's article ("There Really Is a God," 36, no. 4 [Winter 2003]: 79–87), and appreciate *Dialogue's* publishing it. It is useful to see all sides of important issues—in this case, "Is the Book of Mormon authentic history or not?" Dr. Hamblin supports the literal historicity of the book and critiques another's support for a more recent origin.

I would like to comment on Dr. Hamblin's statement: "This is simply more of the same . . . from some cultural Mormons." The word "some" suggests that Dr. Hamblin doesn't himself think this way but that among *some* true believers a "cultural Mormon" is automatically a second-class member, barely to be tolerated and certainly not to be trusted.

One of my favorite scriptures is: "To some it is given to *know* that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. . . . [T]o others it is given to *believe on their words*, that they also might have eternal life *if they continue faithful* (D&C 46:13–14; emphasis mine).

"To know" (to have a testimony) is a wonderful gift, but I take the second half ("continue faithful" to

"have eternal life") to be an equally fine gift.

As a supportive and faithful (but also cultural) Mormon, I would simply ask those of you who have been "given to know" to accept those of us who have not yet received such knowledge but who desire to "continue faithful" in full fellowship in the Church. Those of us who live by faith alone have the same important spiritual, historical, traditional, family, service (and, yes, cultural) ties to the Church as those of true believers. True believers themselves often have strong cultural connections to the Church. That is one of the basic aims of the Church, wouldn't you say?

David G. Pace's essay ("Our Big Fat Temple Weddings: Who's In. Who's Out. And How We Get Together," 36, no. 3 [Fall 2003]: 243–53) cites a statistic from my *Sunstone* column ("Braving the Borderlands," No. 127 [May 2003]: 67–69) as follows: "It may suggest an option for that LDS population, eighty percent by some estimates, which is *excluded from temple worship*" (emphasis mine). The actual *Sunstone* statement was, "Statistics hint that as many as 80 percent of those baptized worldwide either leave the Church, are asked out, or move to

Group 3 [non-participants] during their lifetimes.”

D. Jeff Burton  
Bountiful Utah

*Joseph, Peepstones, and Pirates*

In his article “From Captain Kidd’s Treasure Ghost to the Angel Moroni” (36, no. 4 [Winter 2003]: 17–42), Ronald V. Huggins links legends of treasure, Captain Kidd, and spirit guardians to Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon.

If, as he says “murdered spirit-guardian ghosts . . . are in all probability the true small talk and old wive’s [sic] gossip of the 1820’s” (34), why attribute all that legendary nonsense to Smith instead of to ordinary community “small talk” where it belongs?

Huggins’s primary error is relying explicitly upon biased anti-Smith “witnesses” as if the latter were infallible—including Willard Chase, an anti-Smith Methodist preacher and admitted peepstone keeper, whose sister, Sally, who shared the same home, peeped into her own peepstone by placing it into a hat to exclude all light in order for her to “see” visions and locate buried treasure. Indeed, Smith reportedly came to Sally Chase several times to ask her to “look” in her peepstone to find buried treasure (Dan Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 5 vols. [Salt Lake City: Signa-

ture Books, 1996–2003], 2:64, 65 note 3, 85, 87, 96–97, 106). Huggins cites Willard Chase twenty-three times in his article.

Apparently there is a professional “conspiracy of silence” never to mention nor acknowledge Smith’s 1820 First Vision, which alone adequately explains Palmyra’s early polarization into pro-Smith versus anti-Smith camps. It also explains the rise of various anti-Smith stories, Hurlbut’s “affidavits,” anti-Smith personal reminiscences, suppression of treasure-seeking by individuals other than Smith, the suppression of accounts of peepstone use by individuals other than Smith, neighborhood jealousies, criminal litigation, and latent and blatant religious animosities, especially among the professional clergy.

Perhaps, if we “all” ignore it, the First Vision will go away. Why must we repeat the obvious—i.e., that if Smith actually saw God and Jesus in the spring of 1820 as he stated, then all orthodox Christian clergy instantly become unemployable and most of their groundwork and doctrine becomes false. And the latter includes Methodist preacher Willard Chase (whose possession of a peepstone is, except for Vogel, never mentioned) and his “vision-

ary" sister Sally, Smith's purported mentor in "peepstone gazing" (Vogel 2:65 note 3).

In light of my recently published attack upon both the 1834 Hurlbut-Howe "affidavits" and the 1826 Joseph Smith "examination" (not trial) (*Dialogue*, 36, no. 4 [Winter 2003]: xi-xv), I must mention Huggins's erroneous interpretation (41) of the "fictitious record" testimony of Jonathan Thompson about the two quarreling Indians, one "*killed by the other; and thrown into the hole beside the tru[n]k, to guard it, as he [Thompson, not Smith] supposed*" (emphasis Huggins's). This quotation attributes nothing whatever to Smith *re* a "treasure guardian ghost." Indeed, it refutes Huggins's main thesis that the interred corpse was killed "for the purpose" of guarding the buried treasure. Even if the italicized statement purportedly by Thompson *were* attributable to Smith, it was simply a burial resulting from an apparently unplanned "quarrel," not an execution intended to produce a "guardian" ghost.

I call the "1826 examination" record "fictitious" simply because legally (and actually) it does not exist. The original is admittedly lost. Three alleged copies thereof disagree with each other about content. The provenance of each of the three divergent "copies" is murky

and may involve criminal felony in removing the original 1826 record, if any, from the Chenango County Court archives. It is a felony in modern law to remove an official court record (especially a criminal record) from the courthouse. Not even Vogel has considered this possibility, so enamored is he of the Rev. Wesley Walters's 1971 discovery of Justice Neely's handwritten purely fiscal notes and Chenango County constable fiscal records, neither of which validates the content of the divergent copies of a purported 1826 nonexistent court "record." Without the original record, we have no basis upon which to evaluate the quality or accuracy of the purported "copies" thereof nor those who may have made them. All of the copies are plainly inadmissible as accurate records of what actually occurred at that 1826 "examination"—an examination which Smith plainly won.

Rev. Walters also removed in 1971 the newly discovered 1826 fiscal notes from their official premises without permission, but that doesn't concern me. What concerns me is that no one has faulted Miss Emily Pearsall, Judge Neely's purported niece who allegedly "*tore the leaves out of the record found in her father's house*" according to a statement made in

1886, some sixty years after the hearing (Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 4:239–42; emphasis mine). How did that purported “record” leave the official premises and enter Pearsall’s “father’s house”? Who was Pearsall’s “father”? How did he obtain the purportedly original, official record? Not even Justice Neely himself, let alone some relative, would have been properly in possession of that “1826 record” outside the official court premises (and long after the events were final).

Huggins’s reliance on dubious sources calls into question the link between Joseph Smith, peepstones, and pirates.

Gerry L. Ensley  
Los Alamitos, California

#### *Serving Two Masters*

I stand by my critique of Mark Thomas’s essay, “Form Criticism of Joseph Smith’s 1823 Vision of the Angel Moroni” (35, no. 3 [Fall 2002]: 145–60). My critique was “Either/Or” (36, no. 1 [Spring 2003]: ix–xii). He responded to it in a letter to the editor titled “A Fictional Account” (36, no. 3 [Fall 2003]: vii–viii).

Thomas repeatedly characterizes my comments as a personal “attack” (vii). This troubles me. I did not “attack” Thomas. I *critiqued* his essay. On the contrary, I have a high regard for Thomas’s work but was dis-

appointed by this essay. Ironically, Thomas resorts to *ad hominem* attack in the form of sarcasm when defending his essay. This is nothing but an attempt to draw attention away from the real issues raised in my critique.

Thomas complains that I have misrepresented him on two points. The first deals with Joseph Smith’s 1838 claim that the Angel Moroni in 1823 added the following words to Malachi 4:5: “Behold, I will reveal unto you the Priesthood, by the hand of Elijah the prophet” (JS-H 1:38). These words are anachronistic to the 1823 setting and date to after Joseph Smith’s and Oliver Cowdery’s 1836 vision in the Kirtland Temple (D&C 110).

In the beginning of his essay, Thomas agreed with H. Michael Marquardt and Wesley P. Walters that the words were added by Smith and said that “Smith placed new words in the mouth of the angel—not to relate history, but to address the theological concerns of Mormonism in 1838” (151). In juxtaposition with unqualified agreement with Marquardt and Walters, Thomas should not have been surprised that at least one reader concluded that Smith had intentionally added words to his account. How else is Smith to “address theological concerns” if not

intentionally? Near the end of his essay, Thomas explains that the words Smith added to Malachi were an honest mistake, that Smith “simply mixed up his own meditations on scripture with his previous vision” (160). I will leave to readers to decide whether the apparent contradiction is a product of my “remarkable creativity” or of Thomas’s undisciplined writing.

Actually, consistency is less important than his implausible assertion that Smith had unintentionally added words to his 1823 vision. Thomas asks: “Who could possibly remember precise quotations after fifteen years?” (vii). Sounds reasonable, but that’s an inaccurate description of what Smith did. Smith did not leave out information due to his inability to remember events that happened fifteen years earlier, but rather added details that were less than two years old. In fact, there is no evidence that Smith thought of his anachronistic reading of Malachi 4:5 before composing the 1838 history—so, for all we know, the added words were invented at that time. Indeed, how reasonable is it to assume that Smith mixed up a post-1836 interpretation of Malachi 4:5 with a story that by 1838 had taken form—even for Smith—through repeated telling? The inescapable conclusion is that Smith knew the added material was for-

eign, both to Malachi and his 1823 claims.

Form critics generally assume that anachronisms are intentional and assign motivations. In this instance, Smith’s motivation was apparently a perceived need to connect his and Cowdery’s 1836 vision of Elijah with the Book of Mormon. Indeed, by 1838 several of Smith’s early followers—David Whitmer, for instance—had apostatized and become critical of his hierarchical innovations. By making Moroni predict Elijah’s restoration of priesthood keys, which placed Smith and Cowdery indisputably at the top of the power structure, Smith was attempting to counter criticism that hierarchy was contrary to his original plan. Similarly, Cowdery’s ordination as co-president in December 1834 was said to have been predicted by John the Baptist in May 1829 (Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith: Autobiographical and Historical Writings*. Vol. 1 [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989], 20-21).

Thomas’s second complaint is that I make it appear that he had compared Joseph Smith’s 1823 vision exclusively to “typical evangelical visions of . . . an angel” (vii) when he had actually argued that “the literary form of the 1823 vision is . . . a mixed one, depending

on the version" (vii). Thomas misrepresents my criticism, which was that Smith's "necromantic encounter" with the spirit of a dead man cannot be described as "typical" of evangelical visions since "angels" are traditionally special creations of God, not former or future humans (xi). In this light, Smith's later use of the term "angel" is incompatible with the treasure-seeking context of the original story.

Ignoring this criticism, Thomas takes up what he thinks is "non-controversial" evidence, declaring that Smith's "prayer for forgiveness" is the "principal evangelical element in the 1832 account" (vii). Since I had questioned the element of repentance as incompatible with the 1823 setting, suggesting that it "should probably be considered part of Smith's later manipulations" (xi), Thomas makes a subtle shift from historical reconstruction to literary analysis: "I am not saying that this evangelical element [of repentance] was the [1823] vision. I am simply stating that Joseph Smith drew from a variety of literary forms, including evangelical, in the 1832 account" (vii).

Thomas has apparently forgotten that he had argued that Smith's 1823 vision was real, or at least hallucinatory, because it was consistent with "the common setting for evangelical visions" (157). Smith's

repentance, according to Thomas, was a "throw-away detail" with "no particular theological or apologetic significance," and therefore constituted the "most convincing piece of evidence that the historical core of Joseph Smith's narrative reflects sense data" (157).

Now that he has backed off the historical-core argument, perhaps he should also withdraw his "sense data" speculation, which had no merit to begin with. For one thing, his argument is based on the incorrect assumption that Smith's 1832 history was free of apologetic concerns. In addition to responding to internal challenges as discussed in my introduction to this document, Smith was also aware that details about his treasure-seeking exploits were already circulating in Palmyra and Kirtland (Dan Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 5 vols. [Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996-2003], 1:26; 2:223-50; 3:8-10). But even if Smith's mention of repentance were incidental, it still doesn't prove that the 1823 story is based on a real event.

Thomas's closing statement is a jumble of poor reasoning. He commits another non sequitur when he argues that, since Smith could "induce visions" in the Three Witnesses and others, he must have had real mystical experiences himself. The two are not necessarily

connected. It is possible to be a good hypnotist without being a good hypnotic subject or even proficient at self-hypnosis. I do not doubt that Smith had some religious experiences, but that does not preclude his committing pious deception on other occasions.

In arguing that mystics like Ann Lee, Teresa of Avila, Muhammad, and John of the Cross better “avoid anachronism” or historians will conclude that they are liars (vii), Thomas employs an argument contrary to fact or counterfactual argument, also known as the fallacy of fictional proof. For this argument to have merit, Thomas would need to show that these mystics (1) had real visions and (2) committed unintentional anachronisms. To assume that these mystics would have committed anachronisms had they had the same opportunities as Smith to tell their stories, of course, begs the question.

Actually, Smith probably should not be compared to most other mystics since he tried to provide tangible evidence for his claims. When he produced the plates to be felt through a cloth or lifted in a box, he left the mystical realm of subjective truth and entered into the physical world of conscious deception. The plates were not a product of delusion; they were constructed by either Joseph Smith or Mormon.

This is not a false dichotomy but simply the only reasonable possibilities. Thomas tries to ignore this fact, but he must deal with it before his implied unconscious fraud theory can be taken seriously.

Finally, Thomas attempts to associate himself with “the great scholars of the mystical tradition” (viii) who, for reasons other than Thomas thinks, have chosen not to question the veracity of their subjects. As far as I know, there is no universal rule barring historians from making naturalistic conclusions about mystical claims, whether delusion or fraud, especially where the evidence warrants. Nevertheless, if Thomas wanted to set aside the issue of veracity, as some scholars certainly do, that would have been acceptable; but he didn’t do that. Instead, he labored to “prove” that Smith’s visionary claims were based on “sense data” (154–57). However, if one concludes that the plates were fake—as Thomas must—it becomes unnecessary, if not impossible, to maintain that Smith’s claim of an 1823 encounter with a treasure guardian was based on hallucination. In that case, the whole story is fabrication, not just Smith’s later anachronisms dealing with Elijah and the priesthood.

I would advise Thomas to reconsider his attempt to satisfy both

sides of the debate by trying to create a false middle and use his talents for more defensible positions.

Dan Vogel  
Westerville, Ohio

### Editor's Note:

#### In Response to Douglas F. Tobler

*The letter to the editor of Douglas F. Tobler, "Writing Something That Matters" (37, no. 1 [Spring 2004]) has evoked many responses, all of them so far taking exception to some of his assertions. We are happy to publish some of those responses here, which, while defending a wide range of scholarship on Mormon matters, also articulate the ideals and purposes of Dialogue as a journal. Be it said in Professor Tobler's defense that his point of view is widely held by Latter-day Saints; and for that reason it needs, even if we oppose it, our thoughtful recognition that it may well obtain in that good brother or sister by whom we happen to sit during sacrament meeting.*

#### Civility, Compassion, Honesty

Thank you for printing Douglas F. Tobler's letter. While I disagree with some of his criticisms, as well as his choices of words and phrases, I appreciate his cautionary advice. I believe he is correct in suggesting that the hallmarks of real scholarship (assuming, of course, the prerequisite intellectual training) are

meekness and humility; that "we should be very careful about whom and on what we sit in judgment"; and that "we should write our history from the standpoint of respect, not adoration, humility not arrogance or sycophancy, observing all the canons of real scholarship including accuracy, honesty, self-awareness—making every effort to write what is true and meaningful" (vi).

From my own reading of Mormon studies, I have benefitted most from those writers whose works exemplify balance, charity, fairness, and generosity—traits that, as nearly as I can tell, depend more on the breadth and depth of one's life experiences than on one's religious affiliation, testimony, or degree of participation. On the other hand, I have learned little from those writers whose works, as I read them, seem to be marked more by arrogance, dogmatism, and intolerance than by civility, compassion, and honesty.

My own encounters with the writers whom Doug criticizes by name—as well as some of those he may have in mind but does not identify—have clearly been different from Doug's, since I believe they, and many others like them, all have something valuable to contribute to Mormon studies. I know



that my life has been made all the richer because of them.

Gary James Bergera  
Salt Lake City, Utah

*Fair-Minded People*

I agree with Douglas Tobler that insider historians have a perspective that no one else can quite command. There are nuances, pressures, aspirations, even spiritual forces that will elude outsiders, no matter how perceptive and sympathetic. This proposition holds true for the feminist movement, the Communist Party, and the ACLU as well as the Latter-day Saint Church. Perhaps the value of insider history is even greater in a movement like Mormonism that is based so heavily on spiritual experiences.

I do not agree, however, that all histories except insider histories are invalid. Every perspective, even the most negative, can add something to the picture. Wesley P. Walters, who worked ferociously to discredit Joseph Smith, may have irked Latter-day Saints but they learned from his inquiries. Thanks largely to Walters's work, virtually every historian of Mormonism now agrees that the 1826 Bainbridge hearing of Joseph Smith really happened.

Drawing too sharp a line between insider and outsider history can dim our powers of discrimina-

tion. We lump people into categories that do them an injustice. Jan Shipps surely does not belong in the same lump as Jon Krakauer. Shipps has been a defender of the Church as often as she has been a critic. Many Latter-day Saints including me have come to understand their own religion better because of Shipps. She is among the leading theorists of Latter-day Saint history. Krakauer, who focuses primarily on an extreme aberration in Mormonism, has virtually nothing of value to say.

Perhaps no outsider fully "understands" Mormonism in the deep spiritual sense Tobler is thinking of. But Joseph Smith strove to cultivate friends of the Church whether or not they believed. He understood that not everyone who refused to become a Mormon was an enemy. He valued the support of all fair-minded people. Believing Mormon historians would do well to follow his example.

Richard L. Bushman  
New York City

*An Excess of Zeal*

We write in response to Douglas F. Tobler's letter published in your spring 2004 issue. Although parts of Tobler's letter could be characterized as intemperate, his central claim deserves

attention and a thoughtful reply. This we seek to do with this response.

All of us are convinced that it is possible to do meaningful and valuable historical work on Mormonism and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints from multiple perspectives, including those of nonmembers, inactive and former members, as well as “faithful” Saints. Such work is evidence of the maturity and breadth of the Church as well as its importance, rather than its vulnerability, as Tobler suggests.

Contrary to his list of authors who engage in “pure nonsense or self-delusion,” for example, Jan Shippo has revolutionized the field of Mormon history, explaining in original and productive ways how the Church and its members have established a “new religious tradition.” Michael Quinn and Will Bagley are also hard-working and meticulous members of the historical community, whose work should not be dismissed cavalierly. As with all historical scholarship, it is certainly possible to debate specific conclusions drawn by any of these scholars and to argue that the evidence points in a different direction. To rule out their contributions on the basis of a lack of particular religious commitments,

however, is extreme and implausible.

By this criterion, every band of terrorists, Democrats, Republicans, and every religion or secular movement could declare irrelevant any attempt to understand from outside. As the religious scholar Martin Marty put it recently when responding to militant Hindu claims that scholars outside the faith should not be allowed to work on Hinduism: “Today we are learning again that, while heirs of a tradition have a special claim on stories and interpretations, at least at certain stages, good stories are too good to be hoarded by those who claim insider-status” (*Sightings* 10 [May 2004] retrieved June 2004 from [http://marty-centr.uchicago.edu/sightings/archive\\_2004/0510.shtml](http://marty-centr.uchicago.edu/sightings/archive_2004/0510.shtml)).

The LDS Church is not alone in enduring the derision and vilification of sensation-seeking writers like Jon Krakauer and others. Roman Catholics, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Hasidic Jews, and many more have been and continue to be their targets. There can be no immunity from such attacks in a free country. However much one might deplore such sensationalism and its resonance with nineteenth-century persecution, it is vital not to confuse that sort of writing with scholarship nor its au-

thors with scholars. By conflating two entirely distinct kinds of writing, Tobler has done a disservice to Mormon studies and to the scholarly community.

Equally important, his rejection of all work other than that which he regards as "faithful" implies that current members of the LDS Church have nothing to learn from the rest of the world. Sensible people know well that this is not the case, and that such a position cannot be consistent with an ambitious and mature faith. Indeed, the position seems at odds with the Church's own Thirteenth Article of Faith.

Of course, we do not mean to imply that historical scholarship written by current members of the Church is itself somehow suspect or uninformed. Every faith benefits enormously from the perspective of "insider" scholars. To confuse membership with what should count as scholarship, however, is to elevate parochialism over professionalism. In an excess of zeal, Tobler's letter goes too far.

Sarah Barringer Gordon  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Jana Riess  
Winchester, Kentucky

Valeen Tippetts Avery  
Flagstaff, Arizona

Philip Barlow  
Hanover, Indiana

#### *Room for Reason and Study*

I was taken aback by the assumptions and prejudice toward intellectuals displayed in Douglas F. Tobler's letter to the editor. I have always believed that Latter-day Saints were urged to use their intellect and study out gospel matters in their minds before a spiritual witness was granted (D&C 9:8). Thus, I am glad that *Dialogue* provides an open forum to those who wish to freely express their thoughts and present findings of their research to a broad Mormon audience.

As a sincere Latter-day Saint, currently serving as bishop, I faithfully revere the Church primarily as God's kingdom on earth. Nevertheless, I acknowledge and am at times painfully reminded that the Lord's Church functions in a real world, not in an isolated habitat or a social vacuum. Though supervised by revelation, it is human-led and operates an extensive bureaucracy and financial empire. While non-Mormon writers may not share my own sense of awe as I marvel at the workings of the Holy Spirit in Christ's restored Church, I do not know why principles of reason and scientific methods would cease to be in force when

dealing with Mormonism as a human institution and movement.

I will be the first to bow to the valuable experience of seasoned writers, but I also do not understand why being younger than forty would disqualify an otherwise skilled researcher from participating in any type of scientific discourse. But then, as you may have guessed, this is a thirty-one-year-old talking.

*Ralf Gruenke  
Erlangen, Germany*

*Respecting Opposite Opinions*

Now in my sixtieth year, I have come to value differences of opin-

ion and what those differences represent far more than the search for any specific answer or truth. So I can value Douglas F. Tobler's passionate perspective, even though his views are the antithesis of mine at this point in my life.

What is disquieting in reflection, however, is that I publicly, personally, and privately expressed opinions very much like Tobler's during my years of strident ecclesiastical orthodoxy that disingenuously denigrated people whom I later came to know, understand, love, and finally respect.

*Doug Ward  
Longmont, Colorado*