

YEA, YEA  NAY, NAY

TOWARD A NEW READING OF THE BOOK OF MORMON

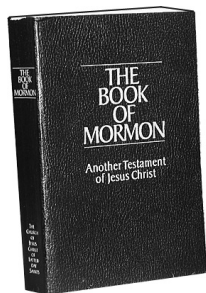
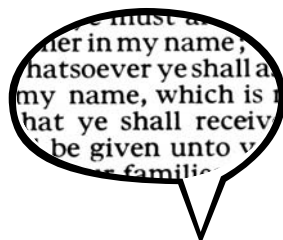
By R. Dennis Potter

ON BOTH SIDES of the debate concerning DNA evidence and the Book of Mormon lie philosophical assumptions concerning science, historical narrative, and language that have not yet been thoroughly investigated. In this short article, I identify these philosophical assumptions and question their validity. Both sides of the debate make these assumptions, so in attacking them, I am rejecting the critics and apologists alike.¹ Because these assumptions are so ingrained in our modernist technological culture, it may seem irrational to question them. But I argue that it is irrational to maintain them.

The upshot of these arguments is to show that we as Latter-day Saints must temper our almost religious faith in the authority of science to tell us the one and only truth about the world—including about the Book of Mormon. My arguments will further show that we must also avoid the tendency toward what I will call “ultra-literal” readings of our religious narratives. And finally, I will argue that the political, social, and cultural implications of how we read the Book of Mormon should play a much larger role in our studies than should questions of authorship and historicity.

SCIENTIFIC REALISM

THE first assumption both critics and many apologists in the DNA and Book of Mormon debate make is that the most current scientific theories give us the most accurate picture of the nature and structure of the world. That is, science pre-



dicts so well because it is true or because it closely approximates truth. Philosophers call this position “scientific realism.” The theory of truth at work in scientific realism is the correspondence theory, which says that declarative linguistic expressions such as “the tree photosynthesizes” express language-transcendent propositions that are true if and only if they correspond to the way the world actually is. In other words, it assumes there are meanings that we can each express no matter what language we choose, and whether or not these meanings are true is independent of any choice of ours about which language we use to express them. Truth depends only on the way the world really is.

Scientific realism contrasts with “scientific instrumentalism,” which says that scientific theories do not necessarily reflect any transcendent truth about the world but are only procedures to help us predict results. I will say more about this point later.

Clearly, the DNA and Book of Mormon debate assumes scientific realism since it assumes that the body of theory that we call “genetics” describes the way the world is.

LOGICAL REALISM

THE second assumption made in this debate is that the assertions of any given discourse can be logically compared in their content to the assertions made by any other given discourse.² This is to assume that there is a uniquely correct logic for

all discourse and one correct meaning for terms such as “contradiction” and “logical entailment.” I will call this position “logical realism.” Logical realism contrasts with a view that says that different discourses may have different logical structures. According to this latter view, assertions from different practices are not necessarily logically comparable—i.e., the question as to whether they contradict one another may have no answer.

Obviously, the DNA debate assumes logical realism since it assumes that some of the propositions expressed by the Book of Mormon narrative are logically comparable to—that is, they contradict or are consistent with—propositions expressed by current genetic research.

OBJECTIONS TO SCIENTIFIC AND LOGICAL REALISM

THERE are many reasons to reject scientific realism. The philosophy of science literature is full of arguments for and against scientific realism, and I can hardly do justice to that debate here. But let me state two objections to scientific realism that are persuasive to me.

The first is that so-called scientific methodology cannot give us any reason to choose between empirically equivalent theories (theories that make all the same predictions). Empirically equivalent theories may have radically different views about the nature and structure of the universe. If so, then scientific methodology does not give us a criterion to use in choosing one way of seeing the world over another.

The second objection to scientific realism focuses on its philosophy of language. The correspondence theory of truth (as it is stated above) does not make sense of how we learn language. It asserts that meaning in language is based on language-transcendent propositions. These are “language-transcendent” because they must exist prior to any particular discourse in order to provide the content for the expressions of that discourse. Propositions are not the linguistic expressions inside a language, but they are what the latter express. As a consequence, the truth or falsity of propositions is independent of our construction of language. Moreover, since propositions transcend any particular discourse or language, they are not concrete (or material) entities. Being transcendent of the concrete expressions of language, we say they are *abstract*.

But how do we come to know about such abstract objects? Do we show them to our children when they learn our language? Do



R. DENNIS POTTER is Mormon studies coordinator and assistant professor of philosophy at Utah Valley State College. He is the founder and former editor of *Element*, a journal of LDS philosophy and theology. He is also a co-founder of the Society for Mormon Philosophy and Theology (SMPT).



QUESTIONS ABOUT WHICH discourse to adopt are not questions about ultimate reality but about what life we choose to embrace.

we have a special intellectual faculty that grasps them intuitively? It seems to me that language must be learned on the basis of observable data, and I don't see abstract objects among them. If language is based on what is publicly available, then we must reject the propositional approach to linguistic meaning. If so, then scientific realism is not plausible. Ironically, this argument is based on the very empiricism that leads most people to embrace science.

Logical realism also has its problems. The first is that there are many different formalized logics, such as classical, intuitionistic, relevant, paraconsistent.³ And each of these systems of logic have different understandings of what counts as a contradiction as well as logical consistency. Professional philosophers seem to assume that classical logic is the right logic and that we have really good reason to believe this. But the logicians themselves know better. What reasons do we have for preferring classical logic to intuitionistic logic? What evidence could possibly count in favor of one instead of the other? If we think that the rules of classical logic "just seem

right," then we can always find someone who thinks that they "just seem wrong." In fact, it is somewhat like religious experience. My religious experience convinces me The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is true, and yours convinces you that the Roman Catholic Church is true. We are in the same boat, and we will be hard-pressed to persuade the other to move from her conviction. It is the same with different logics. My logical intuitions tell me that the Material reading of a particular conditional statement is correct; your intuitions tell you that the Relevant reading of that same statement is correct. Again, where is persuasion going to happen? How are we going to persuade the other to our position?

The second problem with logical realism is that it also assumes the propositional philosophy of language. For logical realism to be true, there must be a universal and transcendent set of propositions that can be the objects of comparison across all discourses. But again, this propositional view of language cannot really explain how we learn language.

TOWARD A MATERIALIST PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE

IN contrast to a propositional theory of linguistic meaning, we need a materialist philosophy of language. Such a theory explains meaning in terms of the actual concrete circumstances of linguistic use. There is

much work to be done in this project, but the following is a little about how a materialist philosophy of language relates to the DNA debate.

Terms such as "truth," "contradiction," and "consistency" are used in the context of a discourse. A contradiction in one discourse may not be a contradiction in another discourse. Assertions in one discourse are not necessarily comparable to assertions in another discourse. Scientific discourse and Mormon religious discourse are fundamentally different in (for example) what counts as evidence for statements about the past. The past-tensed assertions in the

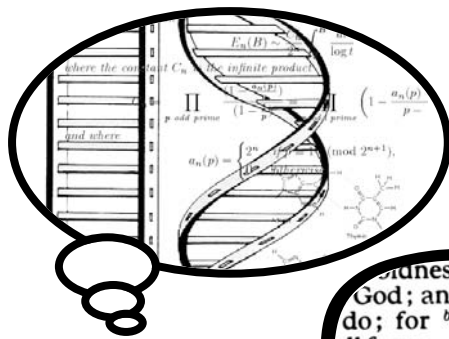
Book of Mormon narrative get their meaning from what the users of the discourse understand to count as evidence for or against such assertions. And Mormons—with the exceptions of critics and LDS apologists—do not count

DNA evidence as relevant to questions about Book of Mormon historicity. To them, such evidence is irrelevant to the most meaningful kind of truth or falsity regarding the Book of Mormon. For them, the religious experiences that accompany their reading of the Book of Mormon narrative hold the preeminent evidential position. These religious experiences determine the meaning of assertions made about the Book of Mormon. And this is clearly a different methodology for the determination of the truth than is found in scientific discourse.

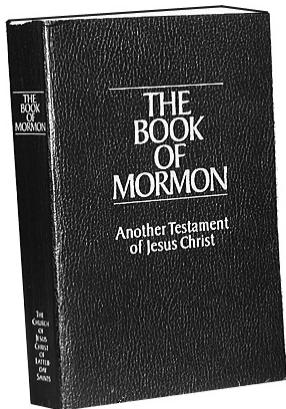
Ultimately, there is no way to judge whether genetics contradicts or is consistent with the Book of Mormon narrative. In principle, we could construct a new discourse that would allow us to logically compare the statements of genetics with the statements of Mormon faith. In effect, both the critics and the apologists are doing this. But neither way is better vis-a-vis a transcendent correspondence to the truth. These are different ways of handling the interaction of these two practices. And we do not need to come up with some way of handling the two practices. I can engage in one discourse and then the other without any inconsistency. I can live in the heterogeneity of the various discourses of my life. This is not to live with a contradiction. There is no contradiction between these practices unless we decide to construct a new practice that encompasses them both and from within which we define the sense of "contradiction."

Let me give a concrete analogy to help explain the position I am arguing. The theory of evolution and the Genesis account of creation are embedded in two different discourses. In order for us to regard them as in contradiction, we must translate the language of one into the language of the other. So, for example, we must say that the Genesis account's use of the word "day" is the same as the scientists' use of the word "day." This translation is not obvious on the basis of the text/discourse itself. And it could be performed in a different way. I believe the DNA and Book of Mormon controversy is very similar to the Genesis and evolution controversy.

One may object to my arguments on the grounds that they lead to a kind of relativism. I'll admit that the view advocated herein is



...ness, having
God; and I fear not what
do; for 'perfect 'love 'cast
all fear.
And I am filled with 'chari
is everlasting love; wh
children are alike ...





ANY FURTHER DISCUSSION of the Book of Mormon and DNA should look at what this religious discourse means for the lives of Native Americans.

relativistic but only in a specific sense. It does not mean that anything goes. To identify the relativism herein, it will help to employ Rudolf Carnap's distinction between internal and external questions.⁴ An internal question is one that can be adjudicated from within a *linguistic framework* (Carnap's word for "discourse") based on its conventions for linguistic use. For example, the question, "What is the product of 2 and 3?" can be adjudicated from within the framework of arithmetic. However, an external question is about the framework itself. For example, the question, "Are there numbers?" is about whether we should adopt the framework of arithmetic in the first place instead of being a question about whether there is a peculiar type of abstract object in the world.

Answers to external questions are relative and a matter of choice. One framework may be more "useful" than another, but it is not "truer" than another. However, answers to internal questions are perfectly objective from within a framework. There is a fact of the matter for each internal question. These are relative to their frameworks, but it is not the case that "anything goes." Questions that compare frameworks are clearly external; hence the question about DNA evidence and the Book of Mormon is external and therefore relative.

TOWARD A NEW READING OF THE BOOK OF MORMON

SO how do these arguments relate to our understanding of the Book of Mormon? In today's world, most of us are so indoctrinated by the "scientific worldview" that we have a hard time seeing the world in any other way. We let science adjudicate everything about the way we see the world, including our religious beliefs.

But why should we have so much faith in science? It is true that it predicts really well. But what does this mean? Only that it helps us to manipulate the world in the way we want. I am not saying that science is not successful and not important. But let's recognize it for what it is and what it is not. It helps us predict and manipulate the world. In many ways, it makes our lives easier. But this is no

reason to think that it gets at the transcendent truth of the matter. There is no reason for us to be so captivated by the picture of the world that it suggests. We need to be a bit more skeptical about science.

Many Book of Mormon apologists will be quite content with that last paragraph. But the non-realist approach to language and truth I advocate herein is a double-edged sword. For example, fundamentalists are arch-realists. They believe that secular science just plain gets things wrong. But they believe that the Bible is actually true "science." Every other discourse is useless—or worse—deceptive. Their view requires the same philosophy of language assumed by scientific realism. And their view is just as implausible, if not more so, since it doesn't have the same predictive success.

Mormons are not Bible fundamentalists, but some Latter-day Saints tend toward a kind of hard-literalism in how they read their narratives. By "hard-literalism" I mean a view that sees the truth of the text's assertions to transcend how they are actually employed in the religious practice. An example is the pursuit of scientific evidence to support the Book of Mormon. Such a pursuit assumes both scientific and religious realism. If my arguments against scientific realism are persuasive, we must also reject this view.

In making these claims about science and hard-literalism, I am not arguing for a liberal approach to theology. Theological assertions are not merely symbolic or metaphors for transcendent truths. And it is a mistake to argue that the Book of Mormon is true in its theological or moral assertions but false in its narrative history. I believe the theology and morality of the Book of Mormon is so tied to its narrative they cannot be separated in this way. For this reason, I reject the liberal approach. I suspect that much of liberal theology assumes scientific realism.

Instead, I advocate a "post-liberal" approach to religious faith that allows it to stand on its own and be adjudicated by its own criteria. Religious assertions are of a different kind than scientific assertions, and their truth is adjudicated differently, but they are assertions nevertheless. Truth, consistency, contradiction, and so forth don't have

meaning outside the discourses or linguistic frameworks that we adopt and in which we define them by our use. Questions about which discourse to adopt are not questions about ultimate reality but about what life we choose to embrace.

Since discourses affect the way people live, political, social, and cultural implications should bear on whether we adopt a particular kind of discourse, including how we read the Book of Mormon. To me, this is the most important upshot from these arguments, and any further discussion of the Book of Mormon and DNA should look at what this religious discourse means for the lives of Native Americans. Caucasian scientists and apologists are discussing a text that has played a fundamental role in defining the identity of the Native American from within Mormonism. It would be good to discuss this issue in a way that brings to the front the socio-political implications of the various solutions to this problem. Does the Book of Mormon narrative help us liberate Native Americans from their marginalized positions in society? How do we need to understand the narrative in order to do this? These are the types of questions we need to ask as we construct our discourses of navigation between our religious narrative and our scientific narrative. ☺



NOTES

1. Although in some way, this essay should be understood as apologetic as well.

2. A "discourse" is a field of language that has its own rules for linguistic use and practice, not unlike Ludwig Wittgenstein's concept of a language game. Often, terms used in one discourse have a different meaning than they do in another discourse. Religious discourse and scientific discourse are two examples.

3. These differ in their acceptance or rejection of different laws governing logical inference. For example, classical logic affirms the validity of the law of excluded middle (every statement is either true or false), and intuitionistic logic does not.

4. Rudolf Carnap, *Meaning and Necessity: A Study in Semantics and Modal Logic*, 2nd Ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1947), 205–21.