

Archaeology and the Book of Mormon

Thomas Stuart Ferguson's
Ambivalent Testimony

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By some accounts Thomas Stuart Ferguson is one of the most famous Apostates from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in my lifetime, but most members of the restored Church have never heard of him. In the 1950s Ferguson, a lawyer by profession and an archaeologist by avocation and inclination, championed archaeological evidence as vindication of the Book of Mormon as an ancient book. Ferguson's arguments for the Book of Mormon carried weight because he was involved in objective archaeological excavations. He founded the New World Archaeological Foundation (NWAFA) in 1952 and helped obtain funding for research in Mexico to test the book's historic accuracy. He worked with outstanding archaeologists of his day. This all changed in 1967 with his loss of faith in the Book of Abraham. Soon after, Ferguson rescinded his witness of the Book of Mormon and pronounced this scripture a modern fabrication. Ferguson's anti-testimony has had more traction among the persuadable than his positive testimony ever did, and his negative claims continue to impact seekers for truth about the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith.

Ferguson is revered by some anti-Mormon writers as a paragon of scientific objectivity when it comes to evaluating archaeological evidence of the Book of Mormon. This is a serious mistake. Ferguson was not a competent archaeologist nor was he objective in the sense meant. Daniel Peterson has written about the NWAFA and Tom Ferguson in detail.¹ In his honor, I add details to his arguments from my knowledge of the NWAFA. Ferguson's apostasy is not as interesting as the manipulation of versions of his story by those who exalt it as the prime example of archaeology disproving the veracity of the Book of Mormon.

Much quarreling about Ferguson's testimony has gone on since his death in 1983. There are two critical issues. What did he really believe about the Book of Mormon at the end of his life? And what importance should be given to his final belief? His son Larry and other family members proclaim that Tom Ferguson died a believer. Others assert the opposite. Written testimony supports each claim. Given the commitments of the disputing parties, the controversy may never be resolved. The important question for onlookers is what difference it makes whether Ferguson believed in the Book of Mormon or not. It may make no difference whatsoever. Manipulations of Ferguson's last testimony in arguments for or against the Church of Jesus Christ are absurd. Ambivalent testimony proceeded from different sides of his mouth. In my view, the evidence that Ferguson rejected the Book of Mormon is overwhelming. The only reason for controversy is that Ferguson seems to have tried to spare his family any opprobrium or shame for his disbelief and did not tell them of his change of heart. The situation, however, may have been more complicated. It seems he continued to profess his belief in the Book of Mormon to them after he decided it was a fraud.

Neither of Ferguson's testimonies for and against the Book of Mormon as a translated ancient book is a reasoned argument from valid evidence, and these testimonies should not be treated as such. Each version is a declaration of faith, the first in favor of the book and the second against it. Ferguson's case against the Book of Mormon (with implications for Joseph

1. Daniel C. Peterson, "On the New World Archaeological Foundation," *FARMS Review* 16, no. 1 (2004): 221–33; see Daniel C. Peterson and Matthew Roper, "Ein Heldenleben? On Thomas Stuart Ferguson as an Elias for Cultural Mormons," *FARMS Review* 16, no. 1 (2004): 175–219.

Smith) depends on his handling of archaeological evidence and inference. He was an amateur all the way. I summarize his efforts in a forthcoming history of the NWF.² Arguments that consider Ferguson an expert archaeological witness should be rejected.

I believe that Ferguson's views of archaeology and the Book of Mormon are incompetent. The reader might wonder why it will take several thousand more words to wind up my argument. I provide evidence to protect any innocents who might be taken in by claims in Ferguson's behalf. I intend to clean up some of the mess he left for the institution I work for, the one he established in 1952. I have worked for the NWF since 1977. My boss for a decade (Gareth W. Lowe) was one of Ferguson's first protégés. As an archaeologist, I am indebted to Ferguson's NWF for research opportunities in Mexico and Guatemala. That is the professional side of my interest in the man; the other side touches on religion and has two aspects. As a member of the Church, I sorrow at Ferguson's struggles with disbelief and would like to understand his loss of faith, especially if it derived from his quest for physical proofs of the Book of Mormon. His case is no more or less interesting than that of any other member who loses faith. Less charitably, as an employee of the NWF for over forty years, I have seen how Ferguson's denunciations of Joseph Smith affect the institution and the legacy of Ferguson's work. I would like the dark cloud of Ferguson's apostasy removed from NWF accomplishments. The man and his creation ought to be judged separately. I attempt to separate them here. As the founding father of the NWF, Ferguson and his reputation always impacted those who worked for the institution, mostly detrimentally. The relationship was always asymmetrical. Ferguson derived prestige and credibility on archaeological matters because he was the founder of the NWF and was instrumental in its research. On the other hand, Latter-day Saint archaeologists who worked for the NWF were always viewed with suspicion because they worked for an organization set up to investigate Book of Mormon claims.

My evaluation of Ferguson takes into account earlier published views, most of them favorable in different ways. Some biographical sketches

2. John E. Clark, "Chronicles of the New World Archaeological Foundation, 1952–1961" (unpublished manuscript).

concern Ferguson the believer, and others concern Ferguson the unbeliever, the agnostic humanist freed from the shackles of Latter-day Saint doctrine. In both he is hero. As described by Jerald and Sandra Tanner, dedicated muckrakers of Latter-day Saint nonsense and scandals, Ferguson was two-faced. Stan Larson, Ferguson's biographer, portrayed him as a "closet doubter"³ and thought the Tanners' criticism went too far. I disagree. Ferguson was an exceptional individual with many admirable qualities, but his moral courage appears to have evaporated along with his belief in Joseph Smith.

With the exceptions of his family and some friends, most interested persons were aware that Ferguson jettisoned his belief in the Church of Jesus Christ between 1968 and 1970 as a consequence of the Book of Abraham controversy that followed the rediscovery of the Joseph Smith Egyptian papyri in late 1967. Ferguson took photographs of these documents to Egyptologists for translation, and the translations they gave him did not correspond to the text in the Book of Abraham. From these scholarly blind tests, Ferguson concluded that Joseph Smith could not translate Egyptian, that the Book of Abraham was a crock, that in fact Joseph Smith could not translate any ancient languages, and thus that Joseph Smith was a phony. It followed that the Book of Mormon could not be a translation of an ancient book and must have been made up by Joseph Smith, with possible help from coconspirators. It further followed that the restored Church is based on lies. Ferguson derived so many conclusions from his encounter with Egyptian scholars that one wonders whether other issues were involved in his decision. That the opinions of a few scholars could overturn the course of his life is suspicious. There is no evidence on record that he engaged any of these professors in debate or questioned their pronouncements.⁴

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3. Stan Larson, *Quest for the Gold Plates: Thomas Stuart Ferguson's Archaeological Search for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Freethinker Press, 1996), 133.
 4. Dr. S. Kent Brown knew one of the professors whom Ferguson approached in his blind tests of translation. This professor told Brown that if he had known what Ferguson was up to, he could have provided him a more favorable translation in light of the Book of Abraham (personal communication). This may be the same incident described by Peterson and Roper, "Ferguson as an Elias for Cultural Mormons," 187–88.

Ferguson's reaction has some logic behind it and is understandable. He is not the first and will not be the last to jettison the Book of Mormon for perceived lack of physical evidence in the real world. The issue is not that Ferguson came to this conclusion. The real issue is that he kept his family in the dark. He pretended that all was as before. On the other hand, he communicated his doubts and disbeliefs to Church members who were looking for an exit from the Church or for a livable compromise with their own disbelief. Ferguson did not leave the Church, but a trail of letters to fellow doubters indicates that in his final years he did not believe it was the true Church of Jesus Christ guided by living prophets. He left positive and negative statements on record here and there that indicate that he told people what they wanted to hear. His ambivalent testimonies contradict one another.

It has been over thirty-nine years since Ferguson's unexpected death on a tennis court in 1983, but apologists for and against the Book of Mormon are still arguing over his body of work and final testimony. What will be his ultimate epitaph? Did Ferguson die in the faith or outside of it? A 1987 book crediting him as the posthumous author contains a 1982 testimony by Ferguson of Christ and the Book of Mormon. Responses to the 1987 book in subsequent years contended that Ferguson no longer believed Latter-day Saint doctrine after 1970 and that he became a disbeliever who feigned faith for the benefit of his wife and children. His statements make a convincing case that Ferguson abandoned his faith and faked it from 1970 on. That he did so for the well-being of his family has some merit, but a double-minded man is not to be trusted.

Some persons see in Ferguson's life an inspiring archetype of how rational empiricism and honesty can overcome the Latter-day Saint faith—how one can enjoy the peace of Zion without committing to its doctrines or paying full tithes and offerings. From this vantage, Ferguson is portrayed as a sincere, energetic seeker of truth whose archaeological testing of the Book of Mormon led him to a conclusion he neither wanted nor anticipated—that the book was a fraud. Such summations of his life are nonsense. Ferguson was not the man they paint, and his decisions do not deserve the press they have received. A few examples will make this case.

FROM DEFENDER TO PRETENDER

Ferguson's accomplishments as a promoter of Mesoamerican archaeology and the Book of Mormon are well documented. Two obituaries cum biographies printed in 1987 portray him as a defender of the faith to the end with nary a whisper of his change of heart. Fred W. Nelson Jr. presented a life sketch of Ferguson's accomplishments as the memorial lecture of the Thirty-Second Annual Symposium on the Archaeology of the Scriptures held at Brigham Young University on October 21–22, 1983, and it was later published in a Society for Early Historic Archaeology (SEHA) newsletter.⁵ Nelson corresponded with Ferguson's widow and obtained access to rare documents. He highlighted four fields of Ferguson's archaeological accomplishments of interest to his BYU audience: (1) Ferguson published three books and some articles drawing attention to archaeological evidences of the veracity of the Book of Mormon; (2) he was instrumental in the creation of the BYU Department of Archaeology in 1946 and in getting his good friend Dr. M. Wells Jakeman hired as its first chair; (3) he founded the New World Archaeological Foundation in 1952; and (4) he was instrumental in obtaining the William Gates collection of papers for the BYU library in the late 1940s. Of these, the creation of the NWAFA was Ferguson's crowning achievement and is the reason his apostasy has any traction with dissenters of the Church. They interpret Ferguson's change of heart as proof that there is no physical evidence of the book to be found. They further interpret NWAFA history as indicating the same thing since this organization has never published any evidence of Book of Mormon peoples or events.

The same issue of the SEHA newsletter with Nelson's tribute to Ferguson included a color flier for the book *The Messiah in Ancient America*, by Bruce W. Warren and Thomas Stuart Ferguson. The claim in large font on the front of the flier is that the book contains "Overwhelming Evidence that Christ Visited Ancient America," and the large font on the back adds, "This volume contains overwhelming evidence, from early Indian and Spanish records, as well as archaeological findings, that supports the *Book of Mormon* claims that Jesus Christ visited the American continent after

5. Fred W. Nelson Jr., "In Honor of Thomas Stuart Ferguson, 1915–1983," *Newsletter and Proceedings of the S.E.H.A.*, no. 161 (1987): 1–7.

his crucifixion in the Old World.” *The Messiah in Ancient America* has Ferguson speaking as if a voice from the dust with his eternal testimony of Christ and the Book of Mormon. Within the book itself, Warren finds two places to affirm Ferguson’s end-of-life testimony of the Book of Mormon.

The Messiah in Ancient America is a curious work, with a major question being why it was written in the first place. The book purports to be a revision of Ferguson’s 1958 *One Fold and One Shepherd*, but this is a stretch. The book was written as a tribute to Ferguson. Warren stated in his preface, “The Ferguson family wanted the new book to be a tribute to Thomas Stuart Ferguson and his abiding testimony of the Book of Mormon and the divinity of the Messiah, Jesus the Christ.”⁶ Appendix 1, Warren’s short history of the NWAFA, ends with a 1982 testimony Thomas and Ester Ferguson included, along with their photograph, in copies of the Book of Mormon to be distributed by missionaries. Their testimony reads as follows:

We have studied the Book of Mormon for 50 years. We can tell you that it follows only the New Testament as a written witness to the mission, divinity, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And it seems to us that there is no message that is needed by man and mankind more than the message of Christ. Millions of people have come to accept Jesus as the Messiah because of reading the Book of Mormon in a quest for truth. The book is the cornerstone of the Mormon Church.

The greatest witness to the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon is the book itself. But many are the external evidences that support it.⁷

I will not interrogate this testimony. Larson pointed out that this was a joint statement, and this changes the nature of the claims as they concern Tom Ferguson.⁸ I know for a certainty that after this testimony was distributed in copies of the Book of Mormon, Ferguson told my boss, Thomas A.

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6. Bruce W. Warren and Thomas Stuart Ferguson, preface to *The Messiah in Ancient America* (Provo, UT: Book of Mormon Research Foundation, 1987), viii.
 7. Warren, “Appendix A: History of the New World Archaeological Foundation,” in *Messiah in Ancient America*, 283.
 8. Larson, *Quest for the Gold Plates*, 272.

Lee, that he did not believe any of it. Moreover, Ferguson was resentful that his former belief in Joseph Smith, the Church of Jesus Christ, and the Book of Mormon had caused him to waste so much time obeying rules he no longer believed in.

The Warren-Ferguson book sparked detailed commentary about Ferguson from those antagonistic to Latter-day Saints, as well as a book by Stan Larson, published in 1996. Ferguson is their man, and they will not surrender him back to Latter-day Saints on the basis of such flimsy claims. In Warren's life sketch of the man, Ferguson comes off as the NWAFF's founding hero with an unshakeable final testimony. Warren may have been confident of Ferguson's frame of mind because Larry Ferguson, one of Ferguson's children, told him that his father expressed fervent testimony of the Book of Mormon a month before he died. Larry also told Warren that his father expressed a wish to revise *One Fold and One Shepherd*, and this was the basis for talking Warren into the project.

Had Larry Ferguson and Bruce Warren described Tom Ferguson's period of unbelief and another change of heart back to his earlier views, there would be an argument on record. As it is, Tom Ferguson's thirteen-to-fifteen-year sojourn as a professed unbeliever is ignored as if it never happened. Larry Ferguson's case is that his father died a firm believer in the Book of Mormon and apparently never wavered.

The counter case is more detailed and compelling. It is that Tom Ferguson discarded his faith in Joseph Smith's abilities as a translator and in the authenticity of the Book of Abraham and the Book of Mormon. On December 2, 1970, Ferguson visited Jerald and Sandra Tanner in Salt Lake City, introduced himself, and then made a bold, unsolicited confession that the Church of Jesus Christ was a fraud, that he had been duped, and that he had wasted twenty-five years of his life trying to prove the unprovable. This event is an appropriate place to pick up the final fragments of Ferguson's story. His confession to the Tanners and later reenactments of it were what made the publication of *The Messiah in Ancient America* necessary to cleanse the Ferguson brand in the first place.

THE POST-1970 FERGUSON

The full significance of Ferguson's 1970 confession may escape readers unfamiliar with the surprised recipients of his unsolicited confession. Jerald and his wife, Sandra, ran the *Lighthouse Ministries*, an outlet dedicated to publishing every wart or pimple that might appear on the face of Latter-day Saints or their doctrines. Their most ponderous compilation of such critical arguments and embarrassing documents is *Mormonism—Shadow or Reality? My red-cover enlarged edition* was printed in 1972 and has 587 double-column pages of material to cater to every brand of Latter-day Saint dissent. This edition contains an account of the Tanners' first meeting with Ferguson.⁹ I will quote from it.

In the following discussion it is important to keep the timeline straight. The contest over Ferguson's testimony is about timing. The Tanners made their claims about Ferguson's changed beliefs while he was still alive, and at no point did he raise personal or legal objections to their claims about him.¹⁰ Ferguson's confession was a free gift to critics everywhere, and it was intentionally and deliberately given. Prior to the occasion, the Tanners and Ferguson had never met. One did not drive by the Tanner house in west Salt Lake City by accident.¹¹

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9. Ferguson sent a letter to the Tanners in 1968 but did not meet them until 1970. Larson claims that in 1968 Ferguson did not know that the Tanners' organization was against the Latter-day Saints. Stan Larson, "The Odyssey of Thomas Stuart Ferguson," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 23, no. 1 (1990): 23. "In November 1969 Ferguson ordered a copy of the controversial publication *The Joseph Smith Papyri* from Modern Microfilm Company of Salt Lake City, complimenting the 'gentlemen' there for 'doing a great thing—getting out some truth on the Book of Abraham.' At this point Ferguson was not aware that this company was run by a husband and wife team of former Mormons, Jerald and Sandra Tanner—only distantly related to N. Eldon Tanner." Larson, *Quest for the Gold Plates*, 93. This is hard to believe, but if it is true, Ferguson was extremely naive.
 10. Peterson and Roper, "Ferguson as an Elias for Cultural Mormons," 181–82, mention a comment in a letter that Ferguson was contemplating a lawsuit against the Tanners at the time of his death. It sounds like Ferguson bluster catering to the bias of his listeners.
 11. Larson, *Quest for the Gold Plates*, 162, related one account very near the end of Ferguson's life (January 4, 1983) in which his friend Ronald O. Barney of

Here is their account of Ferguson's gift to the world:

The first indication we had that Mr. Ferguson was losing his faith in Mormonism was just after Joseph Smith's Egyptian Papyri were rediscovered. In 1968 he wrote us a letter saying we were "*doing a great thing—getting out some truth on the Book of Abraham.*"

Later we heard a rumor that he had given up Joseph Smith's Book of Abraham, but this hardly prepared us for his visit on Dec. 2, 1970. At that time, Thomas Stuart Ferguson told us frankly that he had not only given up the Book of Abraham, but that he had come to the conclusion that Joseph Smith was not a prophet and the [*sic*] Mormonism was not true. He told us that he had spent 25 years trying to prove Mormonism, but had finally come to the conclusion that his work had been in vain. He said that his training in law had taught him how to weigh evidence and that the case against Joseph Smith was absolutely devastating and could not be explained away.

Mr. Ferguson was faced with a dilemma, for the Mormon Church had just given him a large grant (\$100,000 or more) to carry on the archaeological research of the New World Archaeological Foundation. He felt, however, that the New World Archaeological Foundation was doing legitimate archaeological work, and therefore he intended to continue this work.¹²

the Church's Historical Department confronted him with the Tanners' use of some of his statements: "During the visit Barney asked Ferguson if he knew how Jerald and Sandra Tanner were using his 1971 letter to James Boyack, with its repudiation of the Book of Abraham. Barney recorded in his journal that Ferguson 'began to shift in his chair, got pale, and acted as if I was a General Authority that had caught him committing adultery. He apologized all over the place, said the Tanners were creeps, etc.'" I do not find anything of redeeming value in this account of Ferguson's two-facedness. As a trial lawyer, Ferguson knew better than to share private thoughts on paper with anyone who asked. He approached the Tanners and heaped praise on them, not the other way around.

12. Jerald Tanner and Sandra Tanner, *Mormonism—Shadow or Reality?*, enlarged ed. (Salt Lake City: Modern Microfilm Company, 1972), 103. There is blarney in this account that appears to have come from Ferguson. The NWAF was reorganized in early 1961 as the BYU-NWAF, and Ferguson was no longer president and no longer had decision-making functions. His allusion to being ethically stretched by the annual field budget for 1971 smacks of self-delusion. He ceased

The fact that Ferguson volunteered negative testimony to the one outlet he knew would give it maximum coverage does not strike me as “closet doubting,” the conclusion that Larson proffers his readers. In Larson’s defense, Ferguson was not as vociferous in his denials of the faith as he had been in his earlier arguments for the Book of Mormon. There was a clear asymmetry in the public posturing of the early and late Ferguson. The Tanners desired more forthrightness.

The conclusion that the Tanners derived from Ferguson’s rebirth into the light of science is of interest because it is an argument attached to his biography, and it has broader implications:

It would appear . . . that the Mormon Church is in an embarrassing position with regard to archaeology and the Book of Mormon. After the Archaeology Department of Brigham Young University failed to find any real evidence for the Book of Mormon in Mesoamerica, the Church leaders gave “large appropriations” to support Thomas Stuart Ferguson’s New World Archaeological Foundation. This organization also failed to find evidence to prove the Book of Mormon, and the man who organized it, hoping it would prove Mormonism, ended up losing his faith in the Church. It will be interesting to see if the Mormon Church will continue to support the New World Archaeological Foundation under these circumstances.¹³

to have any significant say in NWAF affairs in 1960. His proclaimed bona fides for interpreting archaeological evidence are downright humorous and may explain why archaeology departments do not teach students to argue like lawyers.

In later comments the Tanners added this information to this 1972 quotation: “He felt, however, that this foundation was doing legitimate archaeological work, and therefore he intended to continue the research. He realized that the organization he had founded to establish the authenticity of the Book of Mormon was now actually disproving the Book of Mormon by its failure to turn up anything concerning a Christian culture existing in Mesoamerica prior to the time of Columbus.” Jerald Tanner and Sandra Tanner, “Ferguson’s Two Faces: Mormon Scholar’s ‘Spooof’ Lives On after His Death,” *Salt Lake City Messenger*, September 1988, 4.

13. Tanners, *Mormonism—Shadow or Reality?*, 103.

This is the jewel of the argument disparaging archaeology and the Book of Mormon. There are, however, a few inaccuracies in this statement that merit attention. The relationship between the BYU Department of Archaeology and the NWAf was complex, and the decision to fund the NWAf had nothing to do with the inability of the department to find archaeological evidence to support the Book of Mormon. The Church grant to the NWAf was given in 1955, and the Department of Archaeology was then only eight years old. I will cover this history in detail in a forthcoming publication.¹⁴ It would be closer to the mark to claim that the NWAf was funded precisely because the Church did not want the Department of Archaeology pursuing scripture archaeology. Drs. M. Wells Jakeman and Ross T. Christensen were jealous that the NWAf got all the Church's research money for archaeology, especially since its archaeologists were not even looking into Book of Mormon questions. Meanwhile, the faithful true-believing archaeologists of the department (Jakeman and Christensen) were not given a penny for their research.¹⁵

HERO OR HYPOCRITE?

A fundamental question concerning Ferguson's life history was raised by the Tanners in 1988 in their essay "Ferguson's Two Faces: Mormon Scholar's 'Spooof' Lives On after His Death."¹⁶ Was Ferguson a hypocrite? Their question raises another: If Ferguson was two-faced, how can his testimony be of value to anyone? The issue of Ferguson's honesty troubles me. I cannot square his dishonesty documented in literature against the Latter-day Saints with the respect accorded his testimony in the same publications. According to them, the final thirteen years of Ferguson's life were a running lie, so how can anything he said during that time be trusted? The Tanners supply a plausible answer. In their view, after 1970 Ferguson considered everything a spooof, and one spooof deserves another. This

14. Clark, *New World Archaeological Foundation, 1952–1961*.

15. Ross T. Christensen, letter to Clark S. Knowlton, quoted in Larson, *Quest for the Gold Plates*, 51; see also Ross T. Christensen, "Tell It like It Was: The True History of Archaeology at Brigham Young University," *Newsletter and Proceedings of the S.E.H.A.*, no. 121 (1970): 8.

16. Tanner and Tanner, "Ferguson's Two Faces." See note 12.

would accord with the belief held by some that one does not have to be honest with those who are not honest with them. If Ferguson believed he had been lied to by the Church all along, he may have felt no reservations in lying right back.

The Tanners' characterization of Ferguson in 1972 ruled the day until the 1987 republication of *One Fold and One Shepherd* under a new title and with Bruce Warren as lead author. The 1987 book *The Messiah in Ancient America* rearranged all of Ferguson's chapters, dropped some material, and added arguments from Warren. I believe that Warren would have been better off writing his own book. The most remarkable thing about *The Messiah in Ancient America* was its resurrection of Ferguson as a champion of the Book of Mormon. Responding to the *One Fold and One Shepherd*, the Tanners in 1988 provided chapter and verse of Ferguson's loss of faith.

After the initial enthusiasm for Ferguson's bravery in renouncing his faith in 1970, his credentials became tarnished because he did not make a clear statement and kept his family in the dark. The Tanners encouraged Ferguson to write a book exposing deceits by Latter-day Saints, and apparently he started such a project a few months before he died.¹⁷ I heard of this project in February of 1983 from my boss Tom Lee, to whom Ferguson had borne his soul and expressed his angry discontent with Latter-day Saint doctrine a few hours earlier. Ferguson's actions on this occasion contradict the pitch Larry Ferguson made to Warren to persuade him to rewrite his father's book.

17. As discussed by Larson, *Quest for the Gold Plates*, 157–58, Ferguson was working on a blockbuster exposé of Joseph Smith when he died. His manuscript has not been found. I suspect it was destroyed. One of Larson's sources is Peter Bach, which is Pierre Agrinier's name on his US passport. Pierre was probably Ferguson's oldest and best friend in the NWA. As a student he was recruited by Ferguson at Berkeley in 1956. Ferguson told Agrinier of his then-current book project during Agrinier's visit to NWA headquarters in Chiapas, Mexico, in February of 1983. He also communicated the same thing to Tom Lee, and Lee told me. Ferguson was animated about this project, and he was angry about Joseph Smith and the Church.

I can't imagine that Tom Ferguson contemplated rewriting his 1958 book. I concur with the Tanners that he likely would have rejected the project. Larson records in 1996 that

the Tanners published an article, sensationally titled “Ferguson’s Two Faces: Mormon Scholar’s ‘Spoof’ Lives On after His Death” in the September 1988 issue of their *Salt Lake City Messenger*. The article briefly reviews Ferguson’s early association with the New World Archaeological Foundation, but the principal interest of the Tanners is in documenting his purported disillusionment and loss of faith by recounting his visit to their home in December 1970 and by quoting from seven letters which Ferguson allegedly wrote from 1968 to 1979. These letters record his apparent disappointment at the failure to identify any Book of Mormon cities, his conviction that the Book of Mormon is a work of fiction by Joseph Smith, his loss of faith in Joseph Smith as a prophet, his conclusion that Joseph Smith could not translate Egyptian hieroglyphics, and the characterization of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as a great myth-fraternity. In an oversimplification of the situation the Tanners concluded that “Ferguson believed that archaeology *disproved* the Book of Mormon.”¹⁸

Larson’s cautious newspaper language (“purported,” “allegedly,” “apparent”) in this assessment is puzzling. Why he would doubt the Tanners had information from seven Ferguson letters is beyond me. In the article “Ferguson’s Two Faces,” the Tanners mentioned Larson’s proposed project on Thomas S. Ferguson and asked their readership to send Larson copies of any Ferguson letters they might have. Larson cited many similar letters in his book and made many of the same claims.¹⁹

18. Larson, *Quest for the Gold Plates*, 4, 6.

19. After writing this article, I found a letter from Ferguson (currently in the author’s possession) that muddies the waters. He responded to a letter from a student (whose initials are KHV) on BYU campus, and a copy was given to Bruce Warren and is among his letters. The letter (which was not folded) was sent in a large envelope from Ferguson’s law office on April 7, 1978, and is of interest for its date and content:

SOFT APOSTASY OR HUMANISM?

The first few times I perused Larson's *Quest for the Gold Plates: Thomas Stuart Ferguson's Archaeological Search for the Book of Mormon*, I treated it as a standard scholarly work that included favorable and unfavorable materials in a balanced manner. But it is not that balanced.²⁰ Several features of the book diverge from standard fare. Appendix B of Larson's book is titled "Examining the Authorship of *The Messiah in Ancient America*." In it Larson proves that the new book did not include any new material from the deceased Ferguson and merely reprinted part of his old book. I was perplexed that Larson would take so much offense at the coauthorship of *The Messiah in Ancient America* since over half of its content obviously came from *One Fold and One Shepherd*. He even goes so far as to place a "[sic]" after Ferguson's name on the author line in the cited reference. These features make sense, however, once it is realized that one objective of Larson's book was to obliterate the claim of the Warren-Ferguson book that Tom Ferguson died with his boots on, so to speak—that he died a true believer in the Book of Mormon and all that goes with it.

As a prelude to his detailed treatment of Ferguson's loss of faith in the Book of Mormon, Larson took the reader back to 1987 and 1988 promotional radio ads for *The Messiah in Ancient America*:

"Dear K:

"I have never left the Mormon Church. Presently I teach the Gospel Doctrine Class (on the Book of Mormon). I also sing in my ward choir. People love to spread rumors about others who have been in the news at one time or another.

"I continue my investigations into Book of Mormon matters but there have been no major breakthroughs since *One Fold & One Shepherd* was written.

"Kind regards,

"Sincerely, Thomas Stuart Ferguson"

20. Two extensive reviews of this book were published in the *FARMS Review* and document some of the deliberate biases evident in Larson's book. The review by John Gee, "The Hagiography of Doubting Thomas," *FARMS Review* 10, no. 2 (1998): 158–83, deals well with Book of Abraham issues that vexed Ferguson. The review by Peterson and Roper, "Ferguson as an Elias for Cultural Mormons," is particularly strong in dealing with Ferguson's arguments against the Book of Mormon and the physical evidence for it.

In 1949 [1946] California lawyer, Tom Ferguson, rolled up his sleeves, threw a shovel over his shoulder, and marched into the remote jungles of southern Mexico. Armed with a quote by Joseph Smith that the Lord had “a hand in proving the Book of Moron true in the eyes of all the people,” Ferguson’s goal was: Shut the mouths of the critics who said such evidence did not exist. Ferguson began an odyssey that included twenty-four trips to Central America, eventually resulting in a mountain of evidence supporting Book of Mormon claims.²¹

Many of the early findings of the NWF were published in Ferguson’s 1958 book *One Fold and One Shepherd*. The revised book advertised in time for the Latter-day Saint fall general conference of 1987 was *The Messiah in Ancient America*. According to Larson,

The main point of the commercial—taking into consideration the potential hyperbole of paid advertising—was that Ferguson had amassed evidence so overwhelming that any fair-minded person would have no alternative but to accept the historical claims of the Book of Mormon. Warren’s preface referred to Ferguson’s “abiding testimony of the Book of Mormon.” Paul R. Cheesman, emeritus professor of religious instruction at Brigham Young University, stated in his foreword that this book “should reinstate Thomas Stuart Ferguson as a source of enrichment in the fields of study concerning Mesoamerica and the Book of Mormon.”²²

This clearly was the objective of *The Messiah in Ancient America*. I consider the objective dishonest, and I think Warren was duped into the project. Warren did not know Ferguson well, and as he related in his preface, he

21. Larson, *Quest for the Gold Plates*, 3, quoting the radio ads. This bit of in-your-face editing by Larson in changing 1949 to 1946 showed that those writing this blurb could not get basic facts straight. Larson’s recommended change was hypercorrection. The date should be 1948. The 1946 date refers to a trip Ferguson made with J. Willard Marriott. How did Larson know this was the trip referred to rather than Ferguson’s first trip for archaeological exploration in the jungles around Aguacatal with M. Wells Jakeman? The book promotion was not intended to be precise.

22. Larson, *Quest for the Gold Plates*, 4.

worked on the book to repay a debt he thought he owed Ferguson for having given him research opportunities with the NWAf. I share in that debt, but my repayment here differs from Warren's.

Larson portrayed Ferguson as straddling the fence between Latter-day Saint and anti-Latter-day Saint views. Larson's book has the appearance of a commitment to the restored gospel of Jesus Christ but glorifies the wrong things. It finally dawned on me that *Quest for the Gold Plates* was a whitewash job similar to Warren's, but on the other side of the fence. Larson's view is as sympathetic as Warren's, but from a different perspective. He drew on a wide range of letters for evidence and explored what he calls the "Ferguson Enigma." The enigma "revolves around the true identity of Thomas Stuart Ferguson."²³ Before Larson's book and 1990 article on which it was based, readers had to choose between the faithful Ferguson who believed the Book of Mormon fervently to the end or the apostate Ferguson who denounced it. Larson found another Ferguson—that of the forbearing closet doubter or enlightened anthropologist. "Warren's portrayal of Ferguson in *The Messiah in Ancient America* entertained only traditional beliefs about the Book of Mormon, while the Tanners presented a man who lost his faith and rejected his former convictions. Warren is no more interested in Ferguson's testimony possibly not surviving his scrutiny of the available evidence than the Tanners are interested in how Ferguson may have resolved his problems by finding positive values within the framework of Mormon culture."²⁴

Larson was interested in both things and painted a portrait of a multi-dimensional Ferguson who rejected Latter-day Saint doctrine but enjoyed living among Church members because of their positive values.

Labeling Ferguson a hypocrite seems unnecessarily harsh, for we all share this attitude to some degree in our daily lives. Ferguson tried to

23. Larson, *Quest for the Gold Plates*, 3.

24. Larson, *Quest for the Gold Plates*, 6. This passage was clarified in the 2002 rewrite: "It is clear that Warren was no more interested in Ferguson's critical scrutiny of the evidence than the Tanners were in Ferguson's loyalty to core Mormon values." Stan Larson, "Thomas Stuart Ferguson and Book of Mormon Archaeology" in *Mormon Mavericks: Essays on Dissenters*, ed. John Sillito and Susan Staker (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 244.

be all things to all people. He approached people at the point of their needs and concerns. For example, he never once worried his older sister about these new ideas he had acquired. To faithful members he couched his answers in a way to appear orthodox. However, to Mormons who raised questions he forthrightly revealed his doubts. It was a tightrope between sometimes speaking the party line and sometimes expressing his private thoughts.²⁵

If this is not insincere, I do not know what would qualify. Larson interpreted it as kindness of a sort. He saw Ferguson as having become more tolerant of others' views in his last thirteen years and as having become a "broad-minded humanist."²⁶

Larson performed his own cleanups of Ferguson's image by his selective presentation of materials—in much more detail than Warren ever imagined. Larson destroyed the premise of Warren's book, took exception to the Tanners' 1988 critical account of Ferguson's ambivalent apostasy, and attempted to neutralize criticisms from John L. Sorenson. Larson considered the Tanners' label "hypocrite" for Ferguson too strong, but it appears just right in my view. Sorenson's language was even stronger than that of the Tanners.

John L. Sorenson, emeritus professor of anthropology at BYU, asked a hard question about Ferguson:

Ought we to respect the hard-driving younger man whose faith-filled efforts led to a valuable major [archaeological] research program, or should we admire the double-acting cynic of later years, embittered because he never hit the jackpot on, as he seems to have considered it, the slot-machine of archaeological research?

Sorenson's "double-acting cynic" seems too strong. The two options presented by Sorenson are not mutually exclusive propositions. For one can appreciate the value of the younger Ferguson's establishment of the NWAf, which conducted important archaeological

25. Larson, *Quest for the Gold Plates*, 161–62.

26. Larson, *Quest for the Gold Plates*, 217.

investigations in Mesoamerica, and still respect Ferguson's resolution of the dilemma by retaining Mormon values and yet rejecting the antiquity of the Book of Mormon. Sorenson inappropriately compared Ferguson's long, dedicated search for archaeological confirmation to a gamblers' disillusionment in not getting the million-to-one jackpot.²⁷

27. Larson, *Quest for the Gold Plates*, 161. The Sorenson passage is quoted from John L. Sorenson, addendum to "A Tragedy of Errors," by John Gee, *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 4, no. 1 (1992): 93–119. Gee's article was a review of Charles M. Larson, . . . *By His Own Hand upon Papyrus: A New Look at the Joseph Smith Papyri* (Grand Rapids, MI: Institute for Religious Research, 1992). According to Gee, the "double-acting cynic" in the published version of Sorenson's addendum was a softened rewrite of the original "double-acting sourpuss." Gee, "Hagiography of Doubting Thomas," 159n6.

Larson did not explain why Sorenson's characterization of Ferguson as a gambler is inappropriate. Larson mentioned that Ferguson's search was "long," perhaps as evidence that Ferguson was not looking for quick solutions. He did not list Sorenson in his acknowledgments as one of his sources for his book. Given Larson's thoroughness, I cannot imagine he did not contact Sorenson and seek his input. If so, Sorenson apparently did not cooperate. Sorenson provided more details of what he meant by his characterization of Ferguson in his oral history on file in the L. Tom Perry Special Collections in BYU's Harold B. Lee Library. My interpretation of Ferguson's NFAF correspondence supports Sorenson's opinion. Other than M. Wells Jakeman, Ferguson's former closest friend, Sorenson was the only person on the planet in the 1980s who had been on an archaeological project with Ferguson, so one ignores his information and opinion at one's peril.

The truth is that Ferguson did not search long (in archaeological time) or well. He was looking for a single artifact that would make his case as quickly and efficiently as possible. He really was involved in jackpot archaeology. What Ferguson most desired was to find evidence of Old World writing on a New World artifact. He wanted to shut the mouths of all critics, but he ended up becoming one. Sorenson and Gareth Lowe knew Ferguson well. Sorenson worked with Ferguson in the field for two weeks in 1953 and again later as a cooperating scholar. I rank Sorenson's opinion of Ferguson above all others. He interacted with Ferguson as a peer rather than as an employee for over thirty years and saw the changes in the man. If anyone was positioned to detect cynicism in Ferguson, it was Sorenson. That Ferguson was two-faced is well brought out by Larson himself in numerous long passages.

CRITIQUE OF SORENSON'S PORTRAIT

Sorenson's comments on Ferguson are truly hard to find. He appended them as an addendum to a book review that John Gee wrote of a book by Charles M. Larson about the Book of Abraham and Joseph Smith Egyptian papyri.²⁸ I do not know whether Charles is any relation to Stan. Sorenson's footnotes concerned Ferguson, who popped up as a minor character in the Charles Larson book. Sorenson stated simply that Ferguson was not competent at archaeological interpretation and that his views on archaeological matters do not deserve attention. Stan Larson took exception to Sorenson's opinion. Their disagreement drew out important points about Book of Mormon archaeology. The debate was one-sided because Sorenson did not respond to Larson's critique. Sorenson made the following observations about Tom Ferguson:

[Charles] Larson implies that Ferguson was one of the "scholars and intellectuals in the Church" and that "his study" was conducted along the lines of reliable scholarship in the "field of archaeology." Those of us with personal experience with Ferguson and his thinking knew differently. He held an undergraduate law degree but never studied archaeology or related disciplines at a professional level, although he was self-educated in some of the literature of American archaeology. He held a naive view of "proof," perhaps related to his law practice where one either "proved" his case or lost the decision; compare the approach he used in his simplistic lawyerly book *One Fold and One Shepherd*. His associates with scientific training and thus more sophistication in the pitfalls involving intellectual matters could never draw him away from his narrow view of "research." (For example, in April 1953, when he and I did the first archaeological reconnaissance of central Chiapas, which defined the Foundation's work for the next twenty years, his concern was to ask if local people had found any figurines of "horses," rather than to document the scores of sites we discovered and put on record for the first time.) His role in "Mormon scholarship" was largely that of enthusiast and publicist, for which we can be grateful, but he was neither scholar nor analyst.

28. See note 27.

Ferguson was never an expert on archaeology and the Book of Mormon (let alone on the book of Abraham, about which his knowledge was superficial). He was not one whose careful “study” led him to see greater light, light that would free him from Latter-day Saint dogma, as [C.] Larson represents. Instead he was just a layman, initially enthusiastic and hopeful but eventually trapped by his unjustified expectations, flawed logic, limited information, perhaps offended pride, and lack of faith in the tedious research that real scholarship requires. The negative arguments he used against the Latter-day Saint scriptures in his last years display all of these weaknesses.

[C.] Larson, like others who now wave Ferguson’s example before us as a case of emancipation from benighted Mormon thinking, never faces the question of which Tom Ferguson was the real one. Ought we to respect the hard-driving younger man whose faith-filled efforts led to a valuable major research program, or should we admire the double-acting cynic of later years, embittered because he never hit the jackpot on, as he seems to have considered it, the slot-machine of archaeological research? I personally prefer to recall my bright-eyed, believing friend, not the aging figure [C.] Larson recommends as somehow wiser.²⁹

The only doubt expressed in Stan Larson’s response is whether some of Sorenson’s remarks refer to Ferguson’s 1975 analysis of Book of Mormon geography (printed by both the Tanners and Larson).

Sorenson’s rather harsh indictment of Ferguson’s efforts requires some comment. True, Ferguson was not a professional archaeologist, but he was convinced that his expectations were justified. Also, Ferguson would disagree vehemently with Sorenson’s criticism about his lacking “faith in the tedious research that real scholarship requires,” since it was Ferguson’s strong belief in the value of the careful research carried out by competent scholars that helped him form his arguments concerning the archaeological problems of the Book of Mormon.

Sorenson’s characterization ignored Ferguson’s deep-seated desire to follow the truth wherever it led him—even if it took him far from

29. Sorenson, addendum to “Tragedy of Errors,” 118–19.

the fervent convictions of his youth. On the other hand, Jerald and Sandra Tanner overstated the case when they asserted that “Ferguson believed archaeology *disproved* the Book of Mormon.” For Ferguson, when asked if it was really true that he had found no evidence for the Book of Mormon, responded by saying that the question was too general, since “some [archaeological] findings tend to support—some tend to contradict” the Book of Mormon and “archaeology casts grave doubt on Bk. of Abraham and some doubt on Bk. of Mormon.” So, while the absence of archaeological evidence can never disprove the Book of Mormon, it does cast some suspicion on it, especially since the plant, animal, technological, and literary evidence during the Preclassic time period in Mesoamerica paints a clearer picture year by year.³⁰

The critical comment in the middle of this passage is from a letter Ferguson wrote to J. Don Cerchione on July 21, 1976. It is a reasoned response about physical proofs. One wonders which Ferguson answered the letter and why. Was this another spoof?

Larson leveraged Sorenson’s criticisms to make two claims to sustain the Ferguson legend: (1) that Ferguson was committed to the long grind of careful research and (2) that Ferguson was willing to follow the truth wherever it might lead. The first assertion is obviously false, as Larson’s own research revealed. Ferguson really thought he could get the job done in five years. Ferguson was totally against the tedium of archaeological analysis, such as studying the hundreds of thousands of potsherds collected at Chiapa de Corzo each season, because it took resources away from digging for more artifacts that might make all the difference. As to the second assertion, it appears as self-conceit. Sorenson indicates that Ferguson would not have recognized the truth if it stared him in the face. A major message I take away from Larson’s book is that Ferguson lied according to circumstances, something that never occurred to me before reading the evidence he presented. Ferguson had his “own truths.”

30. Larson, *Quest for the Gold Plates*, 213. The arguments Larson gives for Ferguson in the first paragraph are imagined responses by Larson for which no documentary evidence is provided. Ferguson’s NWA letters do not support Larson’s reading of Ferguson’s state of mind.

THE FERGUSON DILEMMA

Another way of stating the point about truth is to acknowledge that Ferguson adopted the anthropological stance of relativism—now generalized to all social science—that every society and every person has her or his own truth. Larson made the case for this in the final paragraph of his book. This paragraph also makes my point about Larson’s argument being another whitewash of a hypocritical Ferguson and his lack of value as a witness of the untruthfulness of the Book of Mormon.

One may feel that Ferguson’s ideas are completely mistaken, or one may feel that his reconciliation of the conflict between faith and reason is a worthwhile solution. Given Ferguson’s own disillusionment, one must give him credit for having resolved the dilemma to his personal satisfaction, for he was at peace with himself and often spoke of the need to consider the Big Picture. However, it would be unfair to Ferguson to say that he completely lost faith in Mormonism. He continued his church activity and he justified his sometimes waffling behavior on various social and cultural grounds. He saw many beneficial things in the religions of mankind, and Mormonism was to him the most useful—but not ultimately true. Though Ferguson doubted that Joseph Smith could translate Egyptian texts, though he repudiated the antiquity of the Book of Abraham, though he rejected the authenticity of the Book of Mormon, though he questioned that Joseph Smith or anyone else was a true prophet of God—still he considered the LDS Church to be a wonderful fraternity, valued church activity and fellowship, sang in his ward choir, appreciated the moral principles in the Book of Mormon, developed a more tolerant attitude about the opinions of others, felt that religion served a genuine need in human life, found relaxation in working in the garden, and enjoyed life immensely. In fact Thomas Stuart Ferguson was playing tennis when a massive heart attack brought immediate death on 16 March 1983 at the age of sixty-seven. His legacy remains a commitment to the search for truth.³¹

31. Larson, *Quest for the Gold Plates*, 218.

The last line is the message Larson wanted all to take from his book, but the delightful paragraph that precedes this claim completely undercuts its credibility and would make Aristotle blush.³² Larson argued that Ferguson got to the point where he saw all religions as equally true or false, a stance in which truth is evident in its positive effects on a society or person and varies according to the society or to the person. In short, nothing is ultimately true. The two concepts in this paragraph contradict each other. If Ferguson allowed everyone space to pursue her own truth, what does it mean that his legacy was a commitment to “the search for truth”? If everything is equally true and false, Truth with a capital *T* does not exist and cannot matter.

THE FERGUSON FALLACY

The one substantial argument against the Book of Mormon that ties Ferguson and the NWF together is that expected evidence confirming claims in the book has not been found. Archaeologists are unanimous when it comes to the short list of things not found in the New World, such as steel swords, wheat, and horses. We all agree that the Book of Mormon mentions things that have not been verified for the time or proposed places of concern in the book. The problem is that a failure to find these things has too often been taken as positive evidence that the book is a modern fabrication rather than as just an absence of evidence. The same evidence has not demonstrated that such items will never be found—and it can never make such a demonstration. In arriving at their conclusion, the counterarguments presume that the lack of evidence is actually positive evidence for the lack of evidence. The importance of not finding something depends, of course, on the intensity and diligence of the searching. Archaeology has the power to confirm that items have been found but is

32. This last line was changed from the 1990 article to the 1996 book. The last line of the 1990 article reads as follows: “All who knew him were saddened at his passing.” Larson, “Odyssey of Thomas Stuart Ferguson,” 87. The 2002 revision ends with the line from the 1996 book: “His legacy remains a commitment to the search for truth.” Larson, “Ferguson and Book of Mormon Archaeology,” 273. The change is from a sentiment of sympathy to a challenge to Latter-day Saints everywhere to follow Ferguson into permitted paths of truth-seeking.

very poor in predicting what will never be found. Archaeology can never prove that the Book of Mormon is false, and it can never prove it to be true.

A whole genre of arguments against the Book of Mormon has been built up around Ferguson's change of heart and mind. We can add to the man's immortality by officially naming them the Ferguson Fallacy. This fallacy has a major and minor premise, followed by a fallacious conclusion. It goes like this: (1) Thomas Stuart Ferguson spent twenty-five years of his life searching for evidence that the Book of Mormon was an authentic record of peoples who lived in the New World; (2) in the end, he found nothing to convince himself; (3) therefore, the Book of Mormon is a false book made up by a phony prophet. Versions of this fallacy have been circulated among critics ever since Ferguson stepped into Lighthouse Ministries in Salt Lake City in 1970 and confessed he had been duped.³³

One could pad premise 1 with more credentials, but they would not change it much. It is important to recognize that the second premise does not concern evidence but the perception of evidence by a specific person, which points back to the qualifications laid out in premise 1. Anti-Latter-day Saint arguments have simplified the fallacy to a simple claim: (1) There is no physical evidence of the historic authenticity of the Book of Mormon; (2) therefore, the Book of Mormon is false and its author a fraud. Persons who leave the Church of Jesus Christ because they personally deem the physical evidence for the Book of Mormon inadequate follow Ferguson's path to an illogical conclusion.

The excess words used to state the Ferguson Fallacy may block a clear view of the blatant error involved. Trimmed to its bare minimum the bogus argument becomes transparent: (1) Ferguson looked but (2) did not find; (3) therefore, there was nothing to find. How well did he search?

33. The fallacy promoted in Ferguson's name is not the fallacy behind Ferguson's own loss of faith. Drawing from the delightful book *Historians' Fallacies*, by David H. Fischer (1970), John Gee identified the consistent fallacy in Ferguson's arguments about the Book of Abraham as the *ad verecundiam* fallacy, meaning an appeal to professional status or expert opinions. Gee, "Hagiography of Doubting Thomas," 177n63. Anti-Mormon arguments promote Ferguson as an expert and attempt to commit this fallacy, but he was not an expert in the matters attributed to him. To the list of Ferguson's academic deficiencies, Gee noted that he was also gullible and unwise.

How compelling was his opinion of his own efforts? Not much, and not much. Those invoking his name to persuade Latter-day Saints to leave the faith or to convince investigators to stop investigating portray Ferguson as an expert, honest witness. He was many things, but he was neither of these.

FERGUSON AS EVERYMAN

Tom Ferguson lived a fascinating and consequential life. Another chapter to his legend was added in 2018 when he got a write-up in *Science* as someone who contributed substantially, and surprisingly, to Mesoamerican archaeology through the creation of the New World Archaeological Foundation.³⁴ He spent the first part of his married life as a charismatic promoter of Book of Mormon archaeology and the last part of it as a willing-to-unwilling witness against the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith. As depicted by Larson, Ferguson's odyssey was from religious zealot to enlightened humanist.

Ferguson is not the first person to argue himself out of his faith, and he won't be the last. We can all say, "There but for the grace of God go I." Ferguson brought about much good in his life, and I suspect he must have thought his secular doublespeak in his final years was his best solution for keeping his family strong in their faith. Perhaps all of us experience doubts of various sorts. Any ecclesiastical lessons to be learned from Ferguson's personal intellectual journey, however, must await a fuller view of that history from family members not engaged in revisionist history. Of critical interest is the period from 1968 to 1970, for which Larson could find no personal correspondence.³⁵ For now, Ferguson's story has been exaggerated on both sides of the divide between his faithfulness and his faithlessness.

A bottom line of the Ferguson saga, and the golden nugget harvested by anti-Mormon writers, is that no confirmatory evidence of the Book of Mormon has been found. This is not really true, but Ferguson's follies have been spun to make this point. Insufficient attention has been given to the facts of his case. I have copies of Ferguson letters that show he was fully

34. Lizzie Wade, "The Believer," *Science* 359, no. 6373 (2018): 264–68.

35. Larson, *Quest for the Gold Plates*, 136.

on board with his Book of Mormon project as late as 1966 and that he was extremely annoyed at the time with the apostasy of my NWAFF bosses. Ferguson's 1962 reprint of his 1958 *One Fold and One Shepherd* is still his last word. In that book he argued for nearly three hundred parallels between Old World and New World civilizations that indicated ancient transoceanic contact, and he also detailed parallels between Book of Mormon accounts and early Spanish accounts of Mesoamerican peoples.³⁶

No new major findings were made in Mesoamerican archaeology from 1966 to 1970, yet one year the evidence for the Book of Mormon was overwhelming, and a year or two later Ferguson claimed that there was no evidence. His change of mind suggests his evidence was not compelling after all. Even so, his adjustment was too extreme. Nothing changed in the fuzzy evidence, just his manner of looking at it. Ferguson shifted the standard for the burden of proof from 1966 to 1970. Before 1968, the Book of Mormon was true unless proven false. After 1970, the book was false unless proven true. Ambiguities of possible evidence were resolved against the Book of Mormon. It is important to stress that Ferguson changed his mind about the Book of Mormon based on his evaluation of the Book of Abraham, *evidence completely unrelated to it*. The connection was Joseph Smith. Once Ferguson rejected him as a prophet and seer, he rejected everything related to him, including the Book of Mormon.

For me, a basic lesson of Ferguson's odyssey concerns reliance on physical evidence and signs to sustain faith. Physical evidence can never be good enough or complete, and there are no absolute standards by which to gauge it. One important item in the Ferguson saga that I have not seen anyone draw attention to is that he was working on a schedule and deadline. Ferguson expected to find confirmatory evidence rather easily and quickly. He was extremely naive and impatient. He did not find the evidence he wished for in the time he allotted, and he became very frustrated. That is the real problem behind his flip-flop. His arrogance should also be

36. Ferguson's book was reviewed by Michael D. Coe in *American Antiquity*. Normally, a book of this nature would not be touched by the leading journal of American archaeology. Coe was sympathetic to the NWAFF and knew the personnel of the organization. The only value he found in the book was some pictures. Michael D. Coe, review of *One Fold and One Shepherd*, by Thomas Stuart Ferguson, *American Antiquity* 25, no. 2 (1959): 290.

factored in. Arrogance comes through in many of his letters and decisions, and I will not attempt to document it. Considerable doses of self-esteem were necessary for even contemplating some of the tasks Ferguson accomplished, so I do not begrudge him a high self-image. He could never have gotten the Department of Archaeology organized at BYU without being sure of his arguments nor could he have created the NWAf. For these accomplishments he deserves to be honored. As an apologist for and then against the Book of Mormon and the Book of Abraham, he performed poorly. Many issues he raised have not been resolved, and they remain challenges for all who care one way or the other. How does faith become coupled with evidence, and how does one manage doubts? The early Ferguson was a fountain of faith; the late Ferguson was a sower of doubt.

I submit that the multiple testimonies of Tom Ferguson are an insurmountable problem for arguments (pro and con) that promote him as an expert, honest witness. He was neither. If he died a believer, as his son Larry claims, then his letters to the Tanners and others are forgivable excesses superseded by his final testimony. Repentance gives us all hope of forgiveness and redemption. If he died a nonbeliever who had been giving comfort to his family by pretending to still believe to the last, it would make him an admitted liar and even a hypocrite. Perhaps it was a rather harmless lie aimed at a greater good, but it was a real one nonetheless. Either way, Ferguson's comments on Latter-day Saint matters after 1970 cannot be trusted. He does not qualify as a witness to anything other than his own change of mind, and he does not appear to have been forthright with his family on this matter or to have ever intended to be. The pattern documented by Larson and the Tanners is that Ferguson told different people different things. To his family he professed belief. To nonbelievers such as the Tanners and my bosses, he was vociferous in his denunciations of the Church's doctrine.

None of the handy labels for Latter-day Saints tossed around in the Church is a good fit for Tom Ferguson. He enjoyed the society of the Saints, but he rejected Church doctrine. He was an "active" unbeliever with an oft-times warm Latter-day Saint heart and anti-Mormon mind. He adopted relativism, the view that all religions are equally true and false but still have valuable social benefits for believers. In short, Ferguson enjoyed some of the fruits of the gospel but did not believe in the tree.

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