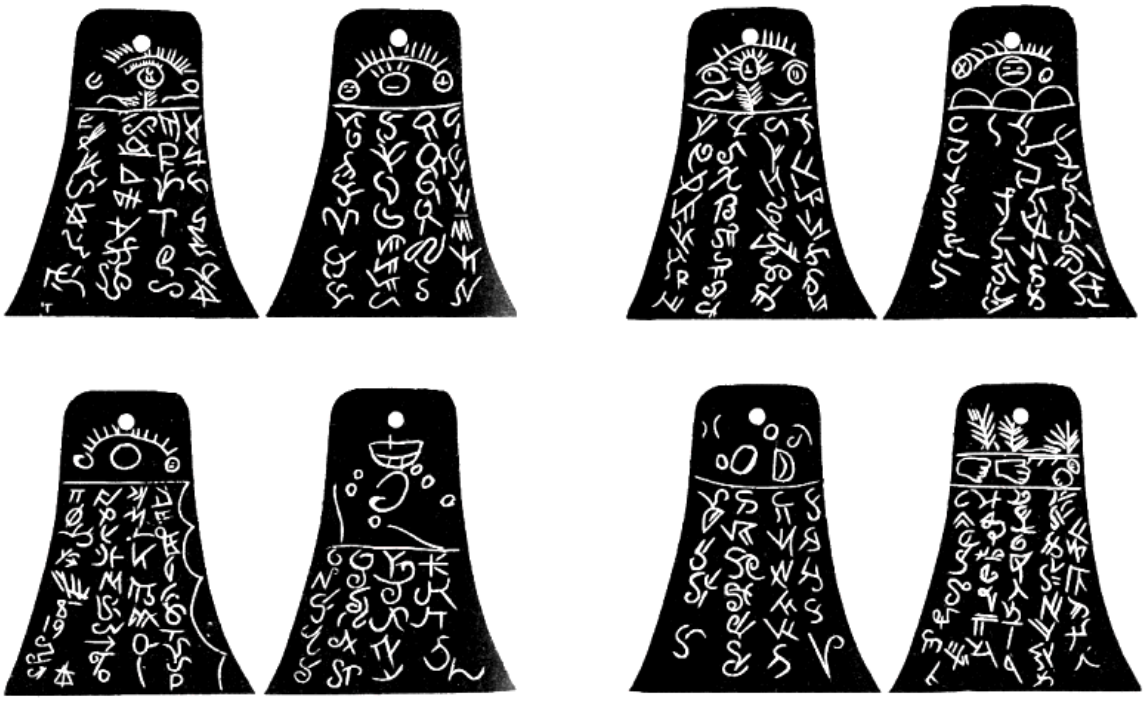
Sample

Answering Mormon Scholars

A Response to Criticism Raised by Mormon Defenders



The Kinderhook Plates

Volume Two

By Jerald and Sandra Tanner

Answering Mormon Scholars

A Response to Criticism Raised by Mormon Defenders

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1996

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1. Mormon Scholars Battle to Save the Book of Mormon

In the first volume of *Answering Mormon Scholars* we responded to some serious accusations made against our work by scholars from the Mormon Church's Brigham Young University. Most of the disparaging material was published by the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS), a non-profit organization that claims to be independent of the church yet defends its teachings.

In this volume we will deal with some additional charges made against us by those who are bent on discrediting our work.

37 Years of Silence

The reader may remember that in the first volume of *Answering Mormon Scholars*, we quoted David Merrill as saying: "The official attitude of the Mormon hierarchy towards the Tanners has been one of silence and apparent unconcern. They have, however, actively discouraged LDS scholars and intellectuals from jousting with the Tanners. . . ." (*Utah Holiday*, February 1978, page 7)

In addition, we also quoted a man who talked to the Mormon Apostle LeGrand Richards about our work. He claimed that Richards told him "to quit studying materials put out by the Tanner's. . . . I told him 'surely some day there will be an answer to these questions.' He told me there never would be an answer and I should stop my inquiries." (Letter dated August 13, 1978)

After quoting the comments attributed to Apostle Richards, we wrote that church leaders were engaged in "a conspiracy of silence" regarding our research. Mormon scholar Matthew Roper, who has criticized our work on a number of occasions since 1991, responded to our comments in an article published by FARMS:

> "Since we began publishing in 1959," write Jerald and Sandra Tanner in their most recent booklet, "the LDS Church has never put forth any official rebuttal. We have waited in vain for thirty-four years for the Church itself to make a response to our work. Although a large number of people have left the Mormon Church because of our publications, and many others have been very concerned . . . Mormon leaders seem to feel that the best policy is silence. Since they apparently cannot find a way to successfully refute our allegations, they believe that the less people know about our publications the better. Consequently they have maintained a conspiracy of silence for thirty-seven years while we have continued to distribute books throughout the world." While LDS scholars in the past have, in the authors words, "followed Church leaders' advice" by ignoring them, now, faced with the imposing bogeyman of their recent book, *Covering Up the Black Hole in the Book of Mormon*, "Mormon scholars have suddenly [come] out like an army to attack us" (p. 1-2). According to the authors, this can only be because their revolutionary ideas "were having a significant impact upon some," nay "*thousands* of members of the Church" (p. 2, emphasis added). . . .
>
> Reading their rebuttal, I was reminded of several observations made by non-LDS historian Lawrence Foster a few years ago. With the Tanners, "Every bit of evidence, even if it could be most plausibly presented in a positive way, is represented as yet another nail in the coffin being prepared for the Mormon church." (*Review of Books on the Book of Mormon*, vol. 6, no. 2, 1994, pages 156-157)

In a longer version of the same article entitled, "A Black Hole That Is Not So Black," Matthew Roper defended the fact that church leaders have remained silent:

> Since the Tanners began their careers, church membership has grown to nearly 9,000,000. In 1993 alone there were over 304,000 convert baptisms. Not only has the Church experienced more growth since the Tanners started fighting it, than it has in it's whole history of 161 years, it has more than quadrupled its membership since they began their ministry. . . .

> Given the miraculous growth of the Church today, why should anyone respond to critics of the Church at all? . . . Given the tremendous responsibility that Church leaders are under and the challenges of administering a rapidly growing Church, I think that the Tanners' grumblings merit little of *their* time and attention. This does not mean, however, that individual members cannot or should not *ever* respond to attacks upon the Church or criticisms of the Book of Mormon. (pages 4, 6)

In another FARMS publication Mormon scholar John A. Tvedtnes wrote:

> Jerald and Sandra Tanner seem to have gotten what they want at last—a debate. For thirty-four years, they complain, the LDS Church never rebutted their work and failed to "refute our allegations" (p. 1). This "conspiracy of silence," they believe, was broken when several LDS scholars undertook to write reviews of their book, *Covering Up the Black Hole in the Book of Mormon*. . . . The Tanners' complaint that the LDS Church and LDS scholars ignored them for so many years struck me as strange. It's like saying, "We shot cannon at their wall and failed to dent it, but the damned fools don't have enough sense to shoot back! . . ." Indeed, all of the statements regarding the Church's wish to ignore them are hearsay only. . . . no church leaders have ever encouraged or discouraged me to respond to the Tanners. . . .
>
> The Tanners' claim that the LDS Church has conducted a "conspiracy of silence" to ignore their work. This is what I call a "Brodieism," from the remarkable ability of Fawn Brodie to read the minds of long-deceased historical personages such as Joseph Smith and Thomas Jefferson. (Review of Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Answering Mormon Scholars: A Response to Criticism of the Book "Covering Up the Black Hole in the Book of Mormon,"* volume 1, pages 1-3; a condensed and "edited version" of the same rebuttal is published in *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon*, vol. 6, no. 2, 1994)

While John Tvedtnes would like his readers to believe that "all of the statements regarding the Church's wish to ignore them are hearsay only," there is good reason to believe that there has been a deliberate attempt to suppress discussion of our writings. Even Lawrence Foster, who has been extremely critical of our work, referred to the Mormon Church's reluctance to deal with the issues we have raised. In 1984, he wrote an article for *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* in which he stated:

> Despite the Tanner's extensive publication record . . . to date *virtually no serious public analyses of their work have appeared*. When the Tanners' arguments have been attacked in Mormon publications, as has occurred on many occasions, *their names and the titles of their writings have almost never been cited*. Indeed, until very recently even independent Mormon scholarly journals such as *Dialogue* and *Sunstone*, which discuss all manner of controversial issues, have *largely avoided mentioning the Tanners by name, much less analyzing their work explicitly*. . . .
>
> The reluctance of Mormon intellectuals to discuss the Tanners has more complex roots. Initially, serious historians were just getting into the relevant primary material and trying to make sense of it themselves. While these scholars had a better understanding of some of the difficult issues that the Tanners highlighted, their understanding was at first very tentative and certainly not sufficiently developed to go into print. The historians also had problems of their own as their research began leading them into a slow but major reconstruction of Mormon history (and most recently, theology) which itself posed a substantial challenge to the conventional wisdom of present-day Mormonism. (*Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, Summer 1984, pages 48-50)

We will show below that a Mormon apostle publicly urged members of the church not to contend with critics of the church.

While it is true that some Mormon scholars are now publishing rebuttals to our work, why do the church leaders refuse to publish a rebuttal under the church's own name? After all, scholars like Tvedtnes, Roper, and others who have attacked us are not spokesmen for the church. It is interesting to note that a statement on the first page of both of the longer rebuttals written by Tvedtnes and Roper warns that, "The opinions expressed are the author's and do not necessarily reflect those of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies."

Clandestine Activities

While the church's apostles have sidestepped dealing with the issues, at one time the Church Historical Department became very disturbed because so many people were writing letters asking for answers to our material. Finally, it was decided that even though the apostles would be opposed to the idea, the Church Historical Department would set forth a response to our work. Surprisingly, in this case both our names and

the name of our book were mentioned. On the other hand, however, since it was necessary to hide the project from the top leaders of the church, neither the name of the author or the publisher appeared anywhere in the booklet!

The anonymous rebuttal to our book *Mormonism—Shadow or Reality?* appeared in 1977 under the title, *Jerald and Sandra Tanner's Distorted View of Mormonism: A Response to Mormonism—Shadow or Reality?* Lawrence Foster made these observations concerning the booklet:

> The Latter-day Saint historian's critique and the Tanners' response to it highlight difficulties that Mormon scholars have in candidly and openly addressing the weaknesses of the Tanners' position. As the Tanners correctly argue in their response to "Dr. Clandestine," the primary reason that the pamphlet was produced anonymously was that if their historical critic had put his name to it, he would probably have gotten into trouble with more conservative Church leaders. Historians such as the Latter-day Saint critic are often as profoundly frustrated as are the Tanners by the historical naiveté of some Church leaders. . . . In effect, some of the less well-informed Church leaders are providing the very rope by which the Tanners are trying to hang them. . . .
>
> Latter-day Saint historians, in their role as constructive rather than destructive critics of the Church, have great difficulty dealing with a two-front controversy with Church conservatives, on the one hand, and the Tanners, on the other. (*Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, Summer 1984, page 53)

The coming forth of the anonymous rebuttal was shrouded in absolute secrecy. While we knew Zion Bookstore was the distributor of the response, we were unable to find out where the booklets were printed. When we asked Sam Weller, the owner of the bookstore, where he had obtained them, he replied that he did not know! and that it was all a very secret operation. He claimed that he received a letter giving details of how he could handle the pamphlet, but that the writer was not identified. When we asked Mr. Weller to show us the letter, he replied that he would not because it was his own "personal property." He maintained that he received 1,800 free copies of the pamphlet and was told that he could use any money he made to make a reprint.

We talked with Wilfrid Clark, who worked for Mr. Weller. Clark claimed that all he knew about the matter was that Zion Bookstore received an anonymous letter containing a key to a room in a self storage company on Redwood Road. He said that he personally went to the company and picked up the books. We eventually found out who the author of the booklet was and the truth about the secret project came to light. Our response to this booklet appeared in a publication entitled, *Answering Dr. Clandestine: A Response to the Anonymous LDS Historian*. In this booklet we identified D. Michael Quinn as the author. Ironically, Dr. Quinn was later excommunicated from the Mormon Church. Quinn absolutely refused to go along with the suppressive policies of the Mormon Church and argued that the church should tell the truth about its history.

Unfortunately, while church leaders chose to outwardly ignore our research, a number of Mormons have been engaged in surreptitious attempts to overthrow our work and that of other critics of the church. For instance, sometime around 1976 a man by the name of Steven Mayfield assumed the alias "Stan Fields." Mr. Mayfield was at that time "employed by the FBI in a clerical capacity."

Mr. Mayfield not only assumed an alias, but he also opened up a post office box to help hide his deception. For a number of years he carried on an extensive spying operation through the mail and through personal contacts. Mr. "Fields," who professed to be our Christian brother, spied on our operation for about four years and also penetrated a number of groups of Ex-Mormons For Jesus. By dishonest means he obtained the names of many Mormons who had questions about their religion. He diligently worked to obtain photographs of critics of the Mormon Church and gathered large files of information.

In his zeal to provide a good cover for himself, Mr. "Fields" went so far as to claim that his own church (the Mormon Church) was "Satan Inspired" (Letter dated July 22, 1978). He even pretended to pass out anti-Mormon material around Temple Square. His scheme, however, was detected in July, 1980, when we discovered his true identity. We found out that he was employed at the Mormon Church Office Building in the Genealogical Department. When we directly confronted him in the Church Office Building, he made no attempt to deny the basic charges. Although he claimed that he "was not spying for the Church," he acknowledged he had used church equipment to carry out the duplicity. We have recently received information indicating that he had contact with church security while he was spying on Mormon critics.

Besides spying on those who had doctrinal differences with Mormonism, Steven Mayfield seems to have had an interest in the activities of homosexuals and feminists. On what we would term an "Enemies' List" Mayfield listed "Affirmation/Gay Mormons"

and "Mormons for ERA." Mr. Mayfield even had a card stating that "Stan Fields is a Regular member of Mormons for ERA." The card was signed by National President, "Sonia Johnson." We have a photograph of this card in a book we published on the subject (see *Unmasking a Mormon Spy: The Story of Stan Fields*).

After his true identity was discovered in 1980, Steven Mayfield claimed that he no longer used an alias. Although he admitted that he secretly recorded telephone conversations in 1982 (Letter dated May 9, 1982), he insisted that he had not been engaged in any illegal activities. He has, however, continued to gather information on critics of the church. If there is anything of bad report regarding enemies of the church, Mr. Mayfield is probably the man who knows all about it.

In the FARMS publication, *Review of Books*, vol. 5, page 320, L. Ara Norwood, a writer who has attacked our work, gives credit to "Steven Mayfield for providing me with much useful information concerning James White's debate escapades" (footnote 7). James White, of course, is a critic of the church. Mr. Mayfield currently works for an anti-anti-Mormon organization—i.e., an organization that tries to counter the claims made by critics of the Mormon Church.

On May 6, 1982, Mayfield appeared on a KBBX radio program. He commented:

> . . . its been my hope to organize us in some way as kind of a counter to say ex-Mormons. . . . I've been in contact with a couple . . . called the Browns—Robert and Rosemary Brown. Well, I don't approve of everything they do, but I have been in contact with them. . . . maybe someday we can be as productive as the ex-Mormons' group . . .

While one would think that the exposure of Mr. Mayfield's activities would discourage Mormons from entering into clandestine activities, subsequent developments prove just the opposite to be the case. In fact, in 1982, we discovered that there were a number of people using fictitious names who were trying to destroy our work. For instance, a spying operation involving two post office boxes was set up in Sacramento, California. Valerie Kuhn, a resident of that city, was deeply involved in that operation. (For more information on this matter see the *Salt Lake City Messenger*, March 1983.)

Secret Tanner Project

In a letter dated August 3, 1981, "Elder Michael Griffith" wrote a promising young scholar a letter in which he stated:

> . . . I thought I'd drop you a brief line and inquire about the possibility of you contributing to a work designed to rebut *Mormonism—S or R?* [*Mormonism—Shadow or Reality?*]
>
> As _____ may or may not have passed on to you, there is a group of "us" who feel that *M—SR?* has for far too long gone unanswered. Oh, there was the brief analysis of 77' [i.e., the anonymous rebuttal], but that . . . is far too incomplete. Something more is needed.
>
> My question is simply this: Would you be interested in writing a chapter for the response to *M—SR?* . . . Please let me know if you would be interested on [in?] this long over-due project.

In the September-October 1981 issue of *The Sunstone Review* the following advertisement appeared:

> FOR SOME time there has been concern about the impact of Sandra and Jerald Tanner's *Mormonism—Shadow or Reality* (and its recent Moody Press version, *The Changing World of Mormonism*). No thorough, formal, direct response has been published, though a number of articles have been written dealing with specific aspects of their criticism. A project is now being organized to formulate an answer to the Tanners and to other prominent critics of Mormonism . . . Anyone interested in contributing to this effort should outline his or her specialty and send the information to: The Tanner Project, P.O. Box 191, Calabasas, Cal. 91302-0191.

Like the anonymous rebuttal, this move to destroy our work was carried on with great secrecy. In fact, the "Elder" whose letter was cited above denied all connection with the project when we confronted him about the matter. The evidence, however, seems to show that he was deeply involved.

In any case, at first we could not learn from the Post Office who had rented the box, but we were told that a "pen name" was apparently being used. Shortly after the ad appeared in *The Sunstone Review*, we were informed that a man by the name of Scott S. Smith was involved, and that he was using the alias "Steven Scott" to carry on his activities.

Later we were able to compare the signatures on letters written by "Steven Scott" and Scott S. Smith and concluded that they were written by the same person. The typewriter used by "Steven Scott" also appears to be the same as that used by Scott Smith. The only conclusion we could draw from this was that Scott Smith was using the alias "Steven Scott." When we told a man who had previously corresponded with Scott Smith that we believed Smith was using an alias, he decided to do

some investigating on his own. Mr. Smith apparently realized that we were gathering evidence against him and did not try to deny the charge. In a letter reporting the conversation we find the following:

> This night (Aug. 1, 1982) I personally talked to Scott Smith on the telephone about the Tanner project. . . . He says he was part of the first working group of people who started the project and opened the P.O. Box.
>
> Smith told me he did not want to say who was the main coordinator of the project . . . Smith says there are about three dozen people who have access to the P.O. Box. . . . He also said that Griffith had some stuff but had not heard from him for some time. Smith . . . personally did not have very much time to devote to the project, adding that many of the others like [John L.] Sorenson didn't either and that it would be best if some young person headed the project . . .
>
> When asked if he used the name Steven Scott, he said: "I used the name, but so did others.". . . He says there is a lot of switching and barrowing [*sic*], of names, and admits to using other peoples' names. He says others have used his name. The reason for all this? To confuse the Tanners! He says they want to make the Tanners go off on wild goose chaces [*sic*] trying to figure out who is who and who is doing what. . . . I hope this helps. (Letter dated August 1, 1982)

On August 19, 1982, we had a very interesting conversation with Scott Smith concerning "The Tanner Project." Mr. Smith confirmed the admissions he had made on August 1, 1982. He said that he used the alias "Steven Scott" and that this was not the only alias he had used during his lifetime. In a letter to us Scott Smith sent a letter confirming the accusations we had made:

> Your March *SLCM* just arrived. Its account of The Tanner Project is essentially accurate for what it covers . . . The P.O. Box in Calabasas was established because several key individuals lived or worked nearby but this has been discontinued . . . There was never any intention of my publishing the fruits of the efforts—there was already an offer from a major publisher to handle that. . . . One of the reasons for sending out press releases was to make contact with those already pursuing similar projects and, from what I gather, there were and are a number of these, which I'm sure will go forward. There was no "dubious foundation" to TTP [The Tanner Project] —pseudonyms were used for the logical reasons you cited and a few of the participants were people you would know and respect. . . . inevitably a "definitive response" to your work will be published. . . . In any event, while I heartily disagree with your conclusions I do appreciate the generally civil way you go about your work, which distinguishes it from some of your allies. (Letter from Scott S. Smith, dated April 22, 1983)

The reader will remember that in the letter written by one of Mr. Smith's associates the writer indicated that Smith had told him that Professor John L. Sorenson was involved in The Tanner Project. On June 4, 1983, Scott Smith wrote us another letter in which he said he wanted to correct this remark:

> . . . one statement needed to be corrected. That was the implication that John Sorenson was involved in The Tanner Project. . . . I may have said something like "Sorenson would be a good one to take it over but he's too busy" but I was never under the impression that he was in any way involved. He seemed up to his ears with FARMS and there were already three archaeology specialists involved with TP so there seemed no point in approaching him.

John L. Sorenson, emeritus professor of anthropology at the church's Brigham Young University, has served as a director at FARMS. He is probably the most well-known defender of "Book of Mormon Archeology." While we have no evidence that Sorenson took part in the clandestine activities involved in "The Tanner Project," he was, in fact, very concerned with the effect our work was having upon members of the church. In a handwritten note made before "The Tanner Project" was exposed, Professor Sorenson boasted:

> Some of us here are talking about holding a conference with enough experts taking on the Tanners' garbage to blow them out of the water.

In the *Salt Lake City Messenger* for March 1983, we wrote the following:

> Now that we have exposed the dubious foundation of "The Tanner Project," we doubt that any respectable Mormon scholars will want to associate their names with it. The Tanner Project seems doomed to failure. Nevertheless, there is growing unrest among Mormon scholars who are not satisfied with the Church's silent treatment. Steven Mayfield's desire "to organize" is shared by many Mormons. Robert Brown's organization is certainly a move in that direction, and Professor Sorenson's threat of assembling "enough experts" to blow "the Tanners' garbage out of the water" may also be a sign of things to come in the future. The Mormon leaders, of course, are trying to prevent a confrontation because they know a discussion of the issues will hurt the Church. Apostle Marvin J. Aston, for instance, pleaded with his people to ignore those who find fault with the Church:

> Whether accusations, innuendoes, aspersions, or falsehoods are whispered or blatantly shouted, the gospel of Jesus Christ reminds us that we are not to retaliate nor contend. . . . we declare there is no time for contention. . . . Probably we will never be free of those who are openly anti-Mormon. Therefore, we encourage all our members to refuse to become anti-anti-Mormon. (*The Ensign*, November 1982, page 63)

> After telling of Apostle Ashton's attempt to restrain people like the Browns from contending with the Church's critics, Linda Ostler Strack comments that "It remains to be seen if the LDS membership can restrain themselves." (*The Sunstone Review*, November 1982, page 5)

FARMS to the Rescue

After "The Tanner Project" failed eight years elapsed in which defenders of the faith were virtually silent.

As noted above, Scott Smith had been hopeful that "a major publisher" would publish the rebuttal to our work. As it turned out, FARMS finally became the launching pad for the missiles which were supposed to counter the "Tanners' garbage" and "blow them out of the water."

After remaining virtually silent for over thirty years, Mormon scholars suddenly came out like an army to attack us. The plan to have a number of scholars simultaneously attack our work, which John L. Sorenson and other Mormon defenders had envisioned several years before, became a reality.

In 1991 FARMS published three reviews, containing seventy-five pages, castigating our work on the theory of a black hole in the Book of Mormon. These rebuttals were written by Matthew Roper, John A. Tvedtnes and L. Ara Norwood.

After the first three reviews appeared in the FARMS publication in 1991, we pointed out how unusual it was for our work on the Book of Mormon to suddenly receive so much attention.

The following year, Daniel C. Peterson, who edits *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon*, tried to explain away the sudden concern regarding our work. In our newsletter for August 1991, we had announced that FARMS had published critical reviews of *Covering Up the Black Hole in the Book of Mormon*. We commented that this book "is one of the most important studies that we have published and that all our readers should be aware of its contents. Since Mormon scholars have publicly come out in opposition to it, we feel that this would be a good time to get it into the hands of as many people as possible. Therefore, we are having a special offer at this time."

Dr. Peterson made these sarcastic comments about our book on the "black hole":

> They claimed to be so gratified by the attention they were receiving that they announced a sale on *Covering Up the Black Hole*. . . . But maybe the real idea was to make a sale on the old car before the wheels and doors fell off and the customer discovered what a lemon he was looking at. (*Review of Books on the Book of Mormon*, vol. 4, 1992, Introduction, pages lxxiv-lxxv)

Fortunately, the "wheels and doors" have not fallen off from what Peterson calls "the old car." In fact, almost five pages were devoted to the book, *Covering Up the Black Hole*, in the July-September, 1995, issue of *The Quarterly Journal*, The Newsletter Publication of Personal Freedom Outreach. In a review of this book Stephen F. Cannon wrote:

> Unknown to most of the world, valuable research into some of the more serious deficiencies in the Book of Mormon has been ongoing for the past several years.
>
> Jerald and Sandra Tanner of Utah Lighthouse Ministry again have proved their importance and sound scholarship in the arena of Mormon historical investigation. Adding to their long list of published material exposing the historical and theological errors of the Mormon Church, in 1990 the Tanners published *Covering Up the Black Hole in the Book of Mormon*. (page 4)

After giving a favorable review of the book, Stephen Cannon stated:

> The Tanners already have completed their first volume, *Answering Mormon Scholars*, and are at work on the second. Volume 1 shows just how weak the counter-arguments of Mormons scholarship are.
>
> Christians interested in the study of Mormonism . . . would do well to acquaint themselves with the ongoing research into the Book of Mormon.
>
> I can think of no better place to begin than with *Covering Up the Black Hole in the Book of Mormon*. (*Ibid*., page 15)

In a footnote in *Review of Books*, vol. 4, page lxxiv, Professor Peterson tried to explain why there were three reviews and such a large number of pages devoted to our work in vol. 3. After giving his explanation, however,