

The Dominant Narrative

Many apologists admit that the standard Mormon narrative we are taught to believe in Church is difficult to sustain given the data:

Richard Bushman, Professor of History emeritus at Columbia University and [one of three general editors of the Joseph Smith Papers](#), [recently said](#):¹

The dominant narrative is not true. It can't be sustained. So, the Church has to absorb all this new information or it will be on very shaky grounds and that's what it's trying to do and it will be a strain for a lot of people, older people especially.

Patrick Mason, the Howard W. Hunter Chair in Mormon Studies at Claremont Graduate University, [recently wrote](#):

I would actually agree with the CES letter's basic notion, that the Mormonism it is responding to [‘a certain style, tone, and mode of Mormonism that culminated in the highly doctrinaire, no-retreat-no-surrender positions taken by certain church leaders and members especially in the second half of the twentieth century’] is unsustainable.

Grant Hardy, author of the popular book “[Understanding the Book of Mormon](#)” and Professor of History and Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina, [recently explained](#):

Today, however, it feels like we're on the defensive. People already know quite a bit about the Church, and with a few clicks of a mouse they can know a lot more, including negative information that was difficult to come by in the 1970s. The story of the Restoration is less clearcut than we had imagined, the sorts of evidences we used to put forward are less persuasive than we had hoped, and troubling issues in Church history have not faded away but instead have been magnified.

Fallback: Apologetics

If the standard LDS narrative is flawed, then one must fall-back to apologetic explanations. However, the apologetic position suffers from its own set of difficulties:

¹Bushman clarified the meaning of his statement in [a note to Daniel Petersen](#). In essence, he stood by the idea that the narrative must be “reconstructed”, but emphasized that a few core features remain believable to him:

The whole church, from top to bottom, has had to adjust to the findings of our historians. We are all having to reconstruct. In my opinion, nothing in the new material overturns the basic thrust of the story. I still believe in gold plates. I don't think Joseph Smith could have dictated the Book of Mormon text without inspiration. I think he was sincere in saying he saw God. The glimpse Joseph Smith gives us of divine interest in humankind is still a source of hope in an unbelieving world.

1. **Most apologetic narratives were considered heresy just a few short years ago by Church leaders** (i.e., before the essays were published).

Even now, I think most apologists would likely be asked to stay silent on any given topic in a standard Sunday school class today because their explanations would not be considered “faith-promoting” and would contradict many of the statements of the Brethren still used in lesson manuals today.

2. **The apologetic defense requires so much nuance that the potency of the Church’s unique truth claims is diluted** (perhaps irreparably).

For instance, imagine a missionary discussion where the missionary related [the 1832 account of the First Vision](#), discussed the translation process of the Book of Mormon as it [actually occurred](#), shared their testimony of the Book of Abraham “catalyzed” from papyri, and shared [the complete story of polygamy](#) (including teenage wives, polyandry, hiding it from Emma, and [liberal denials that it was occurring](#)).

3. **Apologetic defenses lack general cohesiveness.**

LDS Scholarly defenses often depend upon positions which contradict other LDS scholarly work, accepted teachings of the current Church, or well-validated prophetic statements. For instance, to defend the Book of Mormon [against DNA evidences](#) implicitly requires acceptance of data which contradicts [the 6000 year old earth](#) and [a garden of Eden in Missouri](#). Or observe how explanations for the presence of deuterio-Isaiah in the Book of Mormon [depend on a “loose” translation](#) but are inconsistent with the work of Royal Skousen indicating [a word-for-word translation](#). Defenses of one facet of the Church’s doctrine or history often undermine other important truth-claims.

4. **The very need for apologists to defend the faith runs somewhat counter to a system where God speaks to his chosen prophets to reveal truth and resolve confusion.**

The whole beauty of the Restoration is that we are supposed to no longer really need cloistered scholars endlessly debating to arrive at or defend the truth—in past times [the prophet asked questions and received direct answers](#) and [God explained the meaning and importance of his own scripture himself](#). So, in one view, the need for an apologetic defense is itself a tacit admission of the failure of modern day prophets to be able to resolve these issues themselves through direct communication with God.