

Premium Investigative Editorial

Obscure

Redefine

Attack

Misdirection

Lora Bold

The Apologist's Playbook

How Mormonism Defends the Unbelievable
by Redefining Truth

Misdirection

Recontextualize

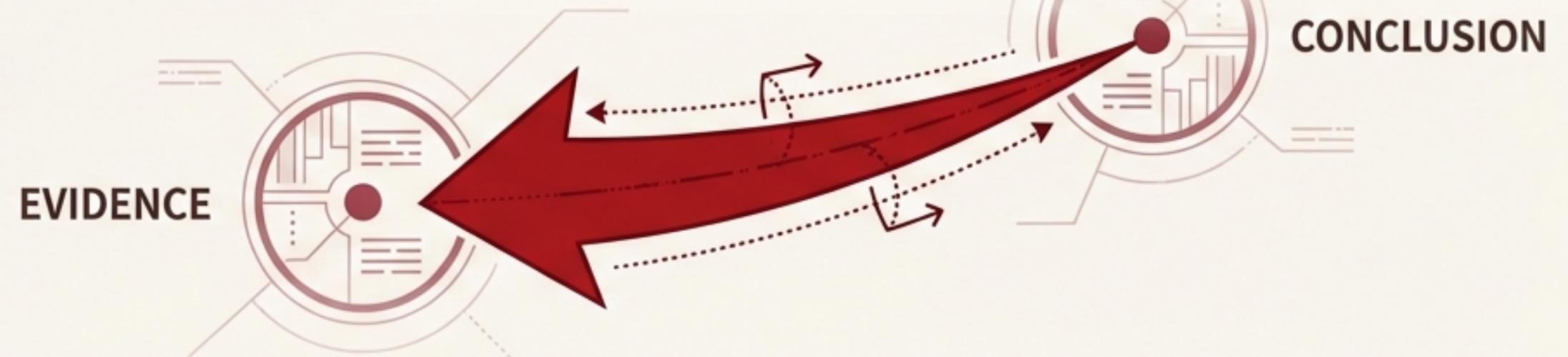
Selective Evidence

The Conclusion Comes First

Apologetics is the practice of defending a religious doctrine through reasoned argument. In theory, it's a defense of truth. In practice, within Mormonism, it often functions as a defense of the institution, regardless of evidence.

“I start out with an assumption that the... restored gospel is true. Therefore any evidence I find, I will try and fit that paradigm.”

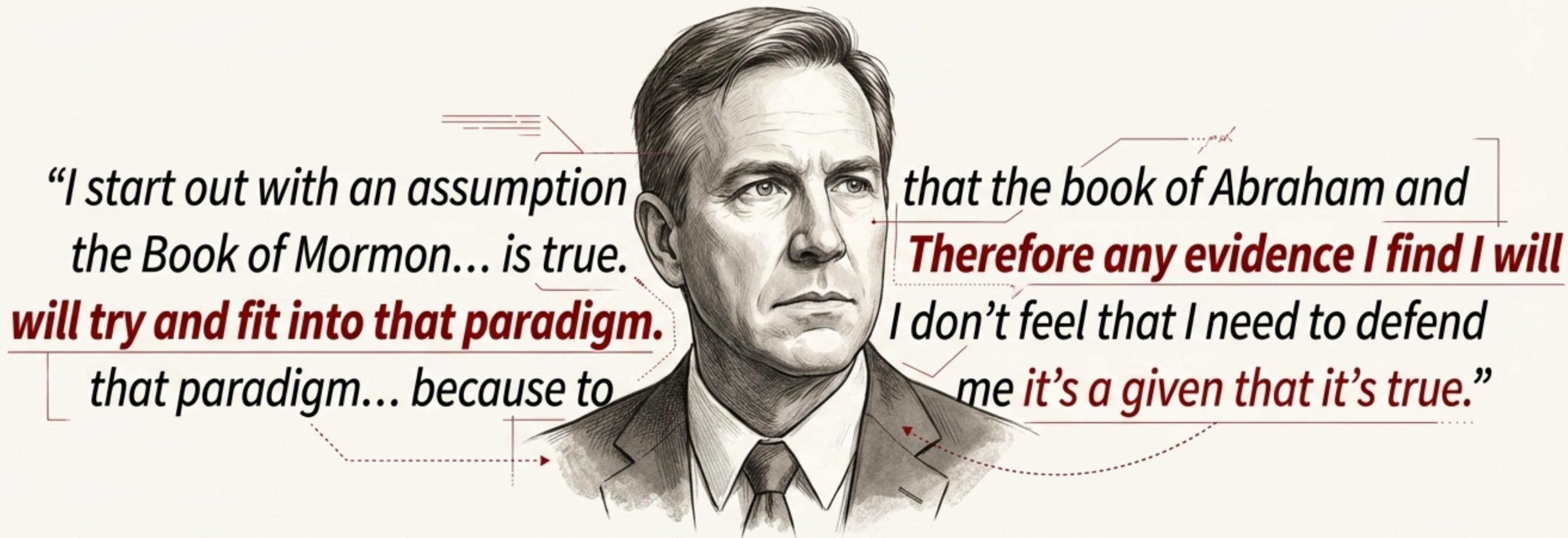
– Kerry Muenstein, BYU Egyptologist



This admission reveals the core problem: Mormon apologetics is not a search for truth, but an exercise in forcing evidence to fit a conclusion that is already “a given”.

'The Quiet Part Out Loud'

When speaking to an inside audience of believers (at a FairMormon conference), apologists admit their methodology. BYU Professor Kerry Muenstein, a church-employed Egyptologist, explains his process.

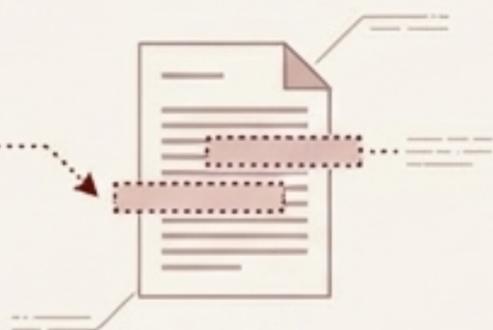


This is the opposite of the scientific or historical method. Credentials are used to assure members of scholarly rigor, but the underlying method is pure motivated reasoning. As the source notes, this is a “conflict of interest” that is not declared in materials intended for the general church membership.

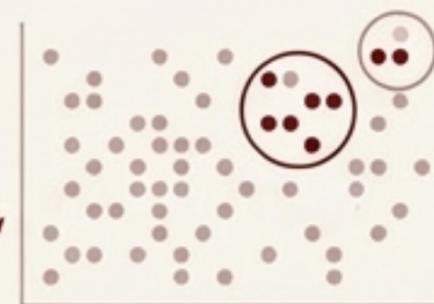
Uncovering the Plays

Apologetics relies on a consistent set of tactics designed to manage problematic information and preserve belief. By recognizing these “plays,” we can see the pattern of institutional defense. We will examine six common plays from the Mormon Apologetic Playbook.

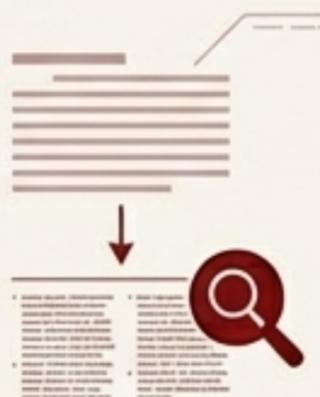
1. Obscure the Past



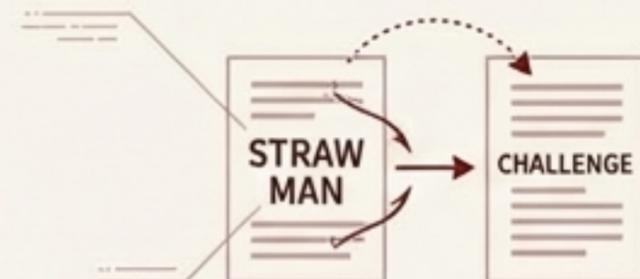
4. Cherry-Pick the “Hits”



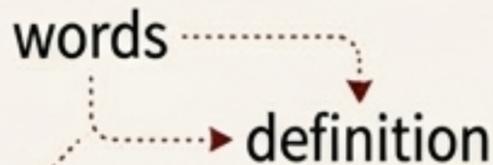
2. Bury the Context in the Footnotes



5. Attack a Straw Man



3. Redefine the Words



6. Demand Loyalty Over Truth



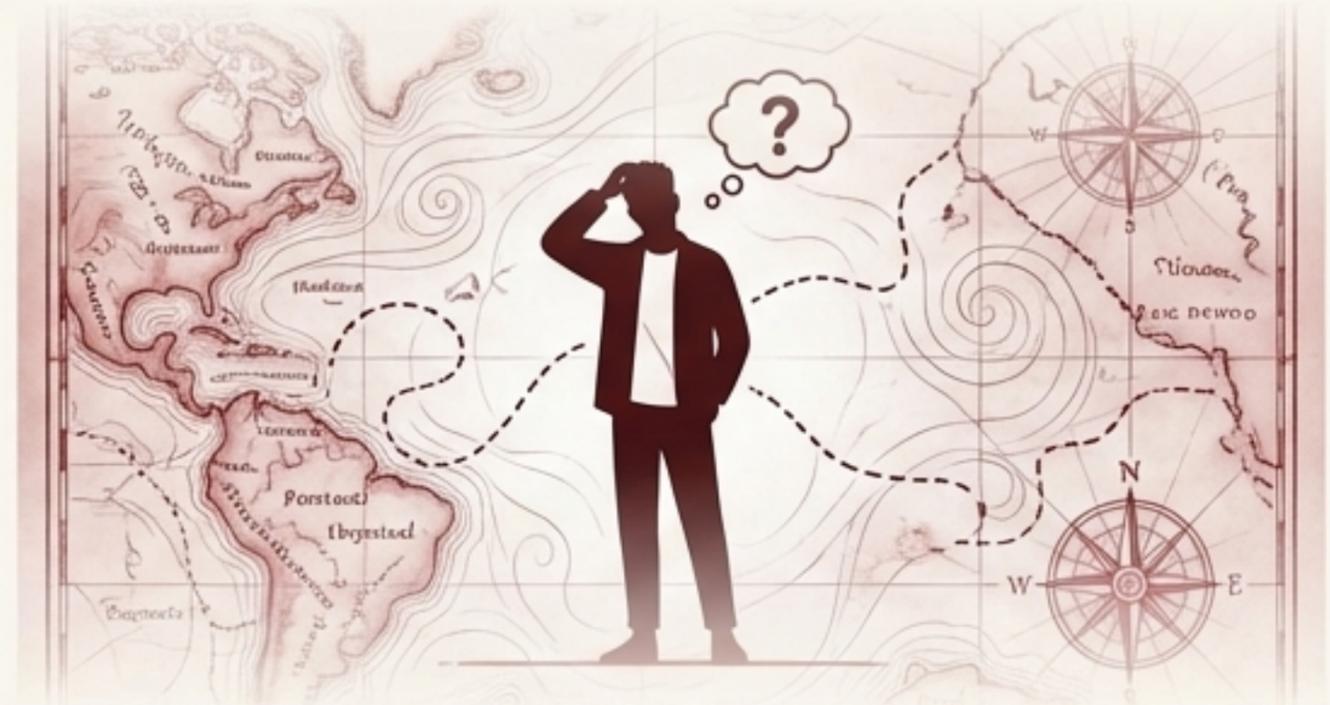
Play #1: The ‘Foreign Country’ Defense

The Tactic:

Dismiss troubling historical events like polygamy with 14-year-olds or the priesthood ban by claiming we can’t judge the past by modern standards (‘presentism’). The past, they argue, is a ‘foreign country’.

“The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there... we don’t want to be an ugly tourist.”

– Matthew Grow, Church Historian



The Reality:

- **Misused Source:** The quote is from a novel about a character regretting his own youthful actions, not about judging a different historical era.
- **The Past Wasn’t That Foreign:** Joseph Smith’s actions were scandalous *in his own time*. Marrying a 14-year-old when he was 38 was not normal, which is why it was kept secret. People were fighting *against* slavery while Joseph Smith was codifying racism into scripture.

This tactic is not an explanation; it’s a ‘smoke screen’ to avoid defending the indefensible.

Play #2: Hiding the Truth in Plain Sight

The Tactic: Use footnotes to create an illusion of scholarly support, quoting sources in a way that completely inverts their original meaning. This technique relies on the assumption that no one will actually check the sources.

Case Study: The Book of Abraham Essay

What the Gospel Topics Essay Says

Close observers... believed that the translation came by revelation. As John Whitmer observed, “Joseph The Seer saw these records and by the revelation of Jesus Christ could translate these records.”
[Footnote 31]



What the Footnote’s Source **Actually** Says

The quote is cherry-picked from a letter by excommunicated scribe Warren Parish. The full letter accuses Joseph Smith of fraud, stating his life has been **“one continued scene of lying, deception, and fraud... in the name of God.”** Parish was exposing Smith, not endorsing him.

Whitewashing History, One Footnote at a Time

The Tactic in Action: Race and the Priesthood Essay

What the Church Essay Claims

To soften the priesthood ban, the essay quotes Brigham Young, saying he “said that at some future day, black church members would have all the privileges... enjoyed by other members.” **[Footnote 9]**

What Brigham Young Actually Said (from the same speech)

The full context reveals a deeply racist theology. Black members would not receive the priesthood ***“until the last of the posterity of Abel had received the priesthood.”***

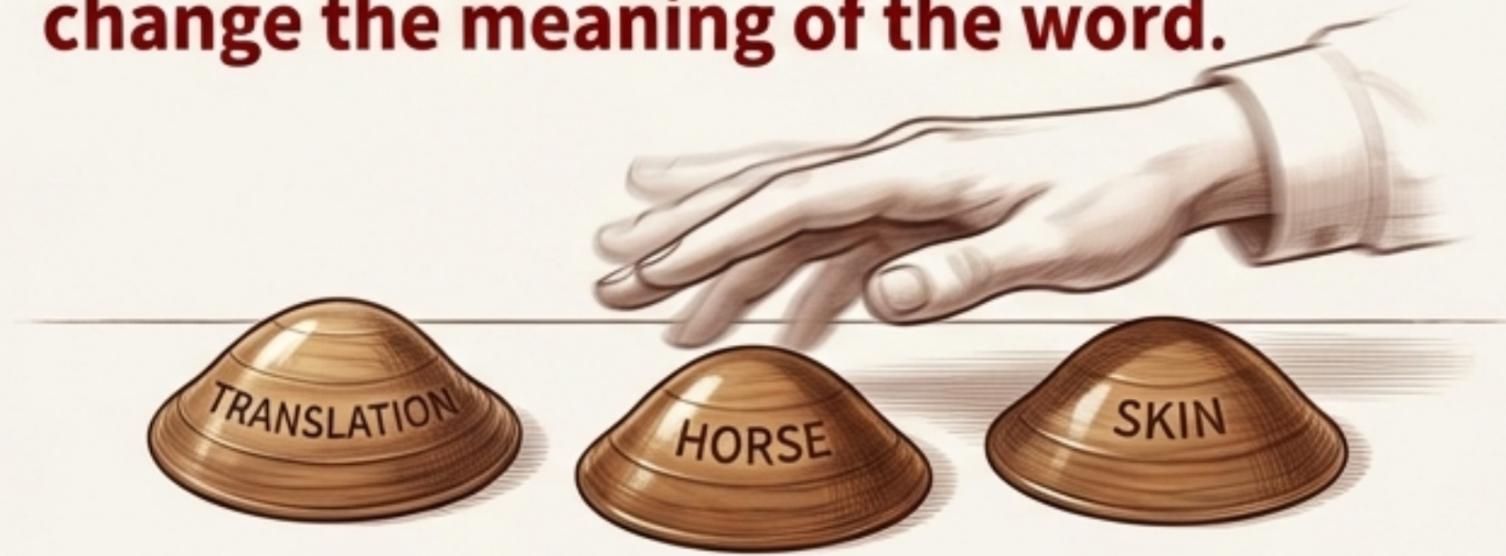
The Deception

The essay presents Young as prophetic and forward-thinking, while omitting his clear statement that the ban would last until every white person on Earth had received the priesthood first. The “future day” was millennia away.

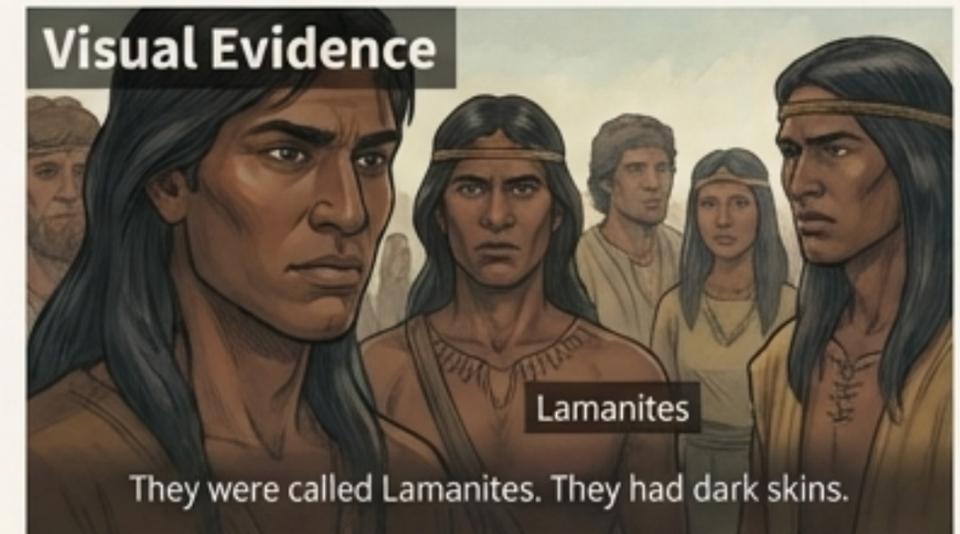


Play #3: The Shell Game

The Tactic: When the plain meaning of a word becomes a problem, **change the meaning of the word.**



- **Translation:** When the Book of Mormon and Book of Abraham were proven not to be literal translations, the word was redefined to mean “revelation” or “bricolage”.
- **Horses:** When no pre-Columbian horse bones were found, apologists suggested “horse” could have meant “tapir”.
- **Skin:** To obscure the racism in the Book of Mormon, apologists argue that “dark skin” doesn’t mean skin color, but a spiritual state or a “mark”.



“They were called Lamanites. They had dark skins.”
Original caption: a recreation of illustration from the church's own *Book of Mormon Stories* for children.

Play #4: The Texas Sharpshooter



The Tactic

Fire 20 shots at a barn, then draw a target around the one that came close and declare yourself a sharpshooter. Apologists highlight a supposed ancient parallel while ignoring overwhelming anachronisms and errors.

The Claim

“How could Joseph Smith possibly have known [X]’ (e.g., that Abraham was nearly sacrificed). This is used to imply divine inspiration.

The Reality

Joseph Smith wasn’t guessing; he was drawing from his environment.

- The story of Abraham’s attempted sacrifice was present in the popular **Adam Clarke Bible commentary**, which Joseph used extensively during his “translation” of the Bible.
- This tactic requires **ignoring all the misses**: incorrect translations on the papyri, 19th-century concepts, King James Version errors, etc.

This isn’t evidence of prophecy; it’s evidence of a 19th-century man absorbing and remixing ideas from his surroundings.

Play #5: Fighting a Straw Man

The Tactic: Instead of engaging with the strongest form of a critic's argument (a 'steel man'), misrepresent it as something weaker and easier to knock down (a 'straw man').



Case Study: Tad Callister on Book of Mormon Authorship

Callister's Straw Man:

He claims critics “**flip-flopped**” by first arguing Joseph was “too ignorant” to write the book, and now arguing he was a “creative genius.” He presents this as a **contradiction** that invalidates the criticism.

The Real Argument:

This isn't a flip-flop; it's a **natural evolution of scholarship**. Early theories were **tested and discarded** as more evidence emerged. The **current scholarly consensus** is that Joseph Smith was a **complex, creative individual** who drew from many sources in his environment—an argument Callister conveniently ignores by focusing on **disproven disproven** 19th-century theories.

Play #6: The Loyalty Test

The Tactic:

When evidence becomes indefensible, shift the argument to one of covenant-keeping and loyalty. Frame the telling of inconvenient truths as a betrayal.

The Mandate (from Apostle Boyd K. Packer to Church Educators):

*“There is a temptation for the writer or the teacher... to want to tell everything, whether it is worthy or faith-promoting or not. **Some things that are true are not very useful.**”*

The Threat:

Packer continues, stating that one who follows their professional tenets (like a historian telling the whole story) “regardless of how they may injure the church... is himself in spiritual jeopardy... **he has broken his covenants.**”

Analysis:

This is an explicit instruction to prioritize faith promotion over factual, comprehensive history. It is “apologetics by fiat,” enforced by threats of eternal consequences.



This Isn't History. It's Theology in Disguise.

The playbook isn't random. Each play serves the same goal: to defend a theological conclusion at all costs. This is not a uniquely Mormon problem, but a classic feature of religious apologetics. Renowned New Testament scholar Bart Ehrman explains the fundamental issue.



“The big issue in Christian apologetics is that apologists are doing theology claiming to do history... History is what you can establish as having happened in the past where you have evidence... If you pretend you’re doing history when in fact you’re doing theology, I just don’t think it’s right. You’re trying to convince people because they don’t know.”

– Bart Ehrman, Renowned New Testament Scholar

A Faith Propped Up by “Plays”

THE VERDICT:

Mormon apologetics is not designed to provide informed consent. It is a system designed to manage information and maintain belief, often through misrepresentation, omission, and redefining terms.



THE IMPLICATION:

The existence of such an elaborate and often deceptive “playbook” is a powerful indicator that the church’s core truth claims cannot withstand open, honest scrutiny.

When the evidence is on your side, you don’t need a playbook.

****If Mormonism was truly about simply restoring plain and precious truths, it just seems odd to me that apologists are needed on almost every issue within the church.****