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Abstract Review of *The Word of God: Essays on Mormon Scripture* (1990), edited by Dan Vogel.

Dan Vogel, ed., *The Word of God: Essays on Mormon Scripture*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990. ix + 271 pp. \$11.95.

Reviewed by Stephen E. Robinson

Korihor's back, and this time he's got a printing press. Korihor, the infamous "alternate voice" in the Book of Mormon, insisted that "no man can know of anything which is to come," that "ye cannot know of things which ye do not see," and that faithful Nephites "were in bondage" to "the foolish traditions of [their] fathers" (Alma 30:13, 15, 27). In its continuing assault upon traditional Mormonism, Signature Books promotes with its recent and dubiously titled work, *The Word of God*, precisely these same naturalistic assumptions of the Korihor agenda in dealing with current Latter-day Saint beliefs. The editor of *The Word of God* explicitly states his intent to challenge "simplistic [i.e., mainline Latter-day Saint] assumptions about the nature of revelation" (p. viii), and almost every chapter of the work is an indictment of the traditional beliefs of the Saints. The work is not in fact an examination of contemporary Mormon views; the actual views of mainline Latter-day Saints are never discussed. Rather, this is a propaganda piece arguing for what in the view of the authors Mormonism ought to become. In many instances the authors should have done a better job of understanding Latter-day Saint doctrine before undertaking to criticize it or press for changes (e.g., p. 238 n. 6).

Variations on a single theme recur, offered like a Trojan horse, in most of the essays in *The Word of God*: since many of the current beliefs of the Latter-day Saint Church are untenable ("the foolish traditions of your fathers"), we need the help of scholars and theologians using the naturalistic method to "correct" them. Practically every essay calls for a "re-interpretation" of traditional Mormon beliefs along the lines of contemporary scholarship or of liberal Protestant theology. Vogel and his associates present these proposed modifications as necessary to the continued viability and health of Mormonism (p. 41), and he enlists the aid of at least five RLDS scholars and clerics who have already helped to "correct" the views of that denomination.

Several of the essays in this book also share other common assumptions: (1) that prophets do not receive objective, propositional revelations from God or objective knowledge of

future events—even though they claim otherwise (p. 31) ["no man can know of anything which is to come," Alma 30:13]; (2) that the authority of scripture is therefore subjective and individual at best (pp. 211-12), and the scriptures can never be *normative* in a literal and objective way as sources of doctrine (p. 22); (3) that the Book of Mormon and Pearl of Great Price are not really ancient documents, but products of Joseph Smith's "inspired" nineteenth-century imagination (pp. 39-40, 70, 231); (4) and that traditional Mormon belief keeps the Latter-day Saints ignorant and intellectually stifled ("I say they are in bondage," Alma 30:24). William D. Russell of Graceland College criticizes pedagogy at Brigham Young University for its failure to embrace biblical scholarship, and Geoffrey F. Spencer, an RLDS apostle, asserts that the traditional Latter-day Saint concept of scripture is responsible for "many if not most Mormons" being culturally illiterate (p. 22). Spencer would deny the distinction between "inspired" and "other" literature altogether, and further maintains that it might be "more consistently true to the nature and locus of revelation and more appropriate for the church" to affirm that "there are, then strictly speaking, no revealed truths" (p. 23). William Russell adds that "there simply is no sure way to distinguish between the word of God and the words of men—or to distinguish between what is inspired and what is not" (p. 51). Mainline Latter-day Saints can only assume from such statements that, like Korihor, Russell would dismiss the Holy Ghost as a reliable indicator. In fact, the role of the Holy Ghost, intuition, spiritual discernment, belief in the absence of empirical data, the burning within, or whatever one wishes to call the genuinely *religious* experience behind the convictions of the Saints is never mentioned between the covers of this book ("ye have put off the Spirit of God," Alma 30:42). The two interpretive issues that all the essays have assiduously avoided, like Dracula avoiding sunlight, are the only two that are determinative for the Latter-day Saint view of scripture: the guidance of living prophets and the witness of the Holy Spirit. And for Latter-day Saints the witness of the Holy Spirit is a witness to certain objective propositions—precisely what *The Word of God* denies is possible. Vogel's desire to separate the scriptural texts from the interpretation of the apostles and prophets is from a Latter-day Saint perspective a crippled view of scripture. It is Protestant, not Mormon. His desire to eliminate the role of the Spirit in interpretation and confirmation

of propositions suggests an approach, like Korihor's, that is mono-dimensional—there is only the empirical.

For years anti-Mormons have hammered the Church from the outside, insisting that Joseph Smith and the Latter-day Saint scriptures he produced were not what they claimed to be. By and large the Latter-day Saints simply ignored these attacks. Whether Signature Books and its authors will convince the Saints of the same hostile propositions by attacking from the inside remains to be seen.

Joseph Smith established a religion that was unique in making specific objective and literal claims. For years anti-Mormons have insisted that those claims were false and demanded without success that we repudiate them. Now Vogel and his associates tell the Latter-day Saints in essence, "scholars have proven the traditional claims of the faith to be false, so we must now abandon them. However we can salvage the old vocabulary, the mere words, as long as we surrender their content, the ideas themselves, and redefine them to mean things that Joseph and Brigham never intended."

For example, chapters one through five propose that we keep the word "revelation" while denying that objective propositions, historical information, or normative doctrines are revealed by God to prophets. Such doublespeak reminds me of the worker who was assured he wasn't being fired, he was merely being disrecruited. But whether one is fired or disrecruited, the bottom line is the same, and whether one rejects a doctrine outright or merely "redefines" it in a way that contradicts the old definition, the bottom line is also the same. The old objectionable faith of Joseph and Brigham, of objective reality and literal affirmation, is replaced by a "new, improved" faith which is approved by scholars and theologians and which has the good manners not to intrude its propositions into the real, literal, and objective world. What the anti-Mormons couldn't do with a frontal assault of contradiction, Signature and Vogel would now accomplish with a flanking maneuver of redefinition. By the way, this same tactic has already succeeded in liberal Protestantism and is approaching success in contemporary Catholicism. Since these essays use the right buzz-words and quote the trendy gurus of liberal Protestantism, it would appear they are merely attempting to do for the Latter-day Saints what has already been done in other religious worlds.

But before one can reinterpret and redefine with a free hand, one must first get rid of the normative authority of

revelation and scripture. Thus Richard P. Howard challenges the very idea of propositional revelation and hopes his approach will "lead to rethinking our historic images of Joseph Smith as prophet, seer and revelator" (pp.2-3). Anthony Hutchinson attacks the idea of "prophetic television," that prophets actually see and predict future events. Howard, Spencer, Russell, and Lindgren then redefine revelation as essentially a warm fuzzy, the subjective impression that one is having a religious experience. But such subjective fuzzies should not, according to these authors, be translated into objective data—certainly not into normative doctrines, nor, heaven forbid, into an entire Plan of Salvation. Rather, all that can be known through revelation is that one is *having* a revelation. Hutchinson, for example, first impugns the historical value of the Book of Mormon, and then consoles us with the sop that it nevertheless "teaches us that God does reveal himself." Reveals himself how and as what, may I ask, if he reveals no *propositions* about himself? From such a divine pat on the head one may perhaps receive comfort—but not objective information or historical facts, nothing crassly literal or tyrannously normative. I can be comforted that God reveals himself, I just can't ever know what that revelation means, let alone explain its content to others.

Such a redefinition of revelation accomplishes two things. First, it destroys the objective *authority* of scripture while still giving lip-service to the *inspiration* of scripture. These authors wouldn't dispute at all that Joseph received revelation or that what he wrote was "inspired." What they object to is taking Joseph's revelations literally or normatively (p. 19-22), as factual information about the real world or as doctrinal propositions to be accepted and believed by the faithful. Second, this redefinition frees one from "the Brethren." For if the inspiration of scripture can only be perceived subjectively and individually, then no one but me can decide what that inspiration means for me (p. 212). This approach denies the normative category altogether, and there can be no "general authorities" to interpret the objective or literal meaning of scripture to the Church. The approach would reduce Mormonism to a loose association of persons sharing a common cultural heritage and a common set of individually and subjectively interpreted texts—but without an ecclesiastical hierarchy. Except for the scholars, of course; after all, the whole point of this book is that Latter-day Saints *must* bow to the authority of scholars. For the Church of the Scholars is no

less authoritarian than the traditional faith. It merely seeks to subject its believers to a more rational authority—to replace the “tyranny” of the Brethren with the tyranny of the intellectuals.

But such a faith would not be *faith* at all. The problem with scholarly religion, religion that has been carefully trimmed so that it conflicts with no empirical data, is that it inevitably makes scholarship the religion. And that is what is proposed here. Indeed, what if anything will we be able to keep of *religious* belief once we agree to be led by the scholars instead of the prophets? In the Church of the Scholars religion can make no claim unsupported by or contradicted by empirical evidence (“ye cannot know of things which ye do not see,” Alma 30:15). But in what sense can this be called *religion* at all? As both the scriptures and the philosophers know, genuine faith is belief in the absence of evidence or even belief that contradicts the evidence. The Church of the Scholars is not a faith at all, but merely intellectual acquiescence to the prevailing scholarly winds. *The Word of God* proposes the ultimate oxymoron—empirical religion, a faith-less faith. Come all ye who no longer believe, but who still want religion, and enter ye in!

But what’s the point of keeping Joseph Smith’s vocabulary, having thrown out his ideas? Why not throw out the vocabulary too, and be honest Protestants without all this bait and switch, without the pretense of “reinterpreting” Mormonism, without the sophistry and the charade? For what Vogel offers here is simply liberal Protestant thought (the vague conviction that there is a God out there, without the courage to predicate anything of him) dressed up in Mormon costume.

This is especially clear in those chapters that caricature Latter-day Saints as fundamentalist inerrantists or naive literalists with a doctrine of scriptural infallibility (e.g., pp. 5, 21, 48, 254). What has happened is that the authors have stumbled across the modernist controversy in Protestantism and would like to re-create the same battle on Mormon turf, casting themselves in the role of the victorious liberals and the Mormons in the fundamentalist Hodge/Warfield role (see pp. 46-47, 255). This creation of a straw man—a tactic Korihor employs in Alma 30:25—does make it easier for Vogel et al. to claim victory, but it can’t be done without seriously distorting the actual Latter-day Saint position.

Another straw man frequently encountered in the book is the assertion that the Latter-day Saints don’t believe Joseph Smith was influenced by his nineteenth century environment

(pp. 47, 188-89). I don't know any conservative Latter-day Saints who would dispute such influence. However, it's one thing to say that Joseph was influenced by his nineteenth century environment, and quite another thing to say that that influence contaminated the revelations to the point that they are robbed of their normative power.

The uniformity of perspective among the essays, the pervasive use of the straw man, and the absence of any opposing viewpoint identify *The Word of God* as a work of propaganda. It is designed not to investigate Latter-day Saint thought, but to change it. It certainly would have been more honest to entitle this work *The Words of the Disaffected: A Criticism of the LDS Concept of Scripture*, but Signature has lately developed a habit of disguising the critical stance of its works with misleading titles. However, three exceptions to this criticism would be the essays by Lancaster and Bush, who have done good historical work apparently without the Korihor agenda, and the essay of Curtis, who, though she takes the naturalistic approach, does not appear to have an interest in attacking or modifying the religion of the Saints.

On the other hand, the most rabid fulminations are those of Ashment, whose hostility to the Church and its leaders can scarcely be concealed (see pp. 254-55 with notes). Ashment is much exercised over "cognitive dissonance," yet the Latter-day Saint God has never had a particular concern with lessening cognitive dissonance—quite the opposite. The Latter-day Saint God most often causes such dissonance on purpose "to prove them herewith," as the book of Abraham would say, and as Abraham himself learned on Mount Moriah.

Several of the authors in *The Word of God* cannot seem to tolerate the suggestion that religious claims should be taken literally or objectively. Like hellenistic philosophy and orthodox Christian theology they insist that religious propositions cannot describe the empirical world and invite the Latter-day Saints to move their propositions to some other world, the world of make believe, over the rainbow, never-never land, the realm of ideal forms. Yes, Virginia there *is* a Santa Claus—but not in the real, empirical world! Only as a set of propositions about an entirely separate and purely hypothetical reality, a fantasy land invented by poets and dreamers, can religion be tolerated by empiricism and the naturalistic method. Religion must never say things about *this* world. Religious claims must never be literal, they must always be "spiritual," i.e., without theoretical verifiability.

And while many other denominations, having adopted the neoplatonic dualism long ago, are perfectly happy to settle for such pie in the sky and to abandon this world to Korihor and the empiricists, Mormonism has consistently refused to do so.

Several of the essays criticize mainstream Latter-day Saint views of scripture on the grounds of contemporary biblical scholarship. But it's no good to test the traditional Latter-day Saint view by appealing to Old and New Testament evidence as interpreted by higher critical scholars. This simply begs the question, since it is a fundamental belief of the Church that the Old and New Testament evidence has already been tainted and that biblical criticism is impotent to reconstruct the real beliefs of those periods. Moreover, the history of modern biblical criticism continually reaffirms that the prevailing views in any half century will in the next half century be proven to be inadequate or incomplete, interpolations and extrapolations being based on insufficient data. Biblical scholarship, or any scholarship for that matter, has quite frequently insisted on things that later turned out not to be so. This is only one reason why one's genuine religious convictions ought not to be too slavishly subordinated to the most recent scholarship.

I suppose by now it is clear that I did not like this book. I did not like it primarily because it is dishonest. It is dishonest to pass off the religion of the scholars as the Church of Jesus Christ. It is dishonest to pass off Protestantism in Mormon dress as the religion restored through Joseph Smith. It is dishonest to pass off a rejection and a denial of that religion as merely a "reinterpretation." It is dishonest to pass off ex-Latter-day Saints, non-Latter-day Saints, Reorganized Latter-day Saints, disaffected Latter-day Saints, and hard-core anti-Latter-day Saints as "Mormon" essayists. Give me a Walter Martin anytime, a good stout wolf with his own fur on, instead of those more timid or sly parading around in their ridiculous fleeces with their teeth and tails hanging out. Give me "Ex-Mormons for Jesus" or the Moody Bible Tract Society, who are at least honest about their anti-Mormon agenda, instead of Signature Books camouflaged as a "Latter-day Saint" press. I prefer my anti-Mormons straight up.