



## Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011

---

Volume 7 | Number 2

Article 6

---

1995

### P.T. Barnum *Redivivus*

Daniel C. Peterson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr>

---

#### BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Peterson, Daniel C. (1995) "P.T. Barnum *Redivivus*," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011*: Vol. 7 : No. 2 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr/vol7/iss2/6>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011 by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact [scholarsarchive@byu.edu](mailto:scholarsarchive@byu.edu), [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).



---

NEAL A. MAXWELL INSTITUTE  
FOR RELIGIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

---

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

**Title** P. T. Barnum *Redivivus*

**Author(s)** Daniel C. Peterson

**Reference** *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 7/2 (1995): 38-105.

**ISSN** 1050-7930 (print), 2168-3719 (online)

**Abstract** Review of *Decker's Complete Handbook on Mormonism* (1995), by Ed Decker.

**Ed Decker. *Decker's Complete Handbook on Mormonism*. Eugene: Harvest House, 1995. 442 pp., with index. \$19.99.**

Reviewed by Daniel C. Peterson

### **P. T. Barnum *Redivivus***

I predict that it will be the definitive work on Mormonism for the next generation.<sup>1</sup>

Ed Decker

This is not, as one would have expected, an indescribably horrid book. It is merely a very, very bad one, and the credit for its improvement must surely belong to the editorial staff at Harvest House.<sup>2</sup> The dedicated anti-Mormons Jerald and Sandra Tanner have noted "Ed Decker's ability to make up stories," "his ability to fabricate evidence to support his own opinions," and his choice of "the path of sensationalism in his work on Mormonism."<sup>3</sup> They are not alone. Decker's activities as a professional opponent of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have been

---

<sup>1</sup> Ed Decker, in *Saints Alive in Jesus Newsletter* (March–May 1995): 3.

<sup>2</sup> Perhaps Decker's admirer Hank Hanegraaff, of the Christian Research Institute, deserves some of the credit as well. His brand of anti-Mormonism is usually more mainstream than that fostered by Decker. Hanegraaff was the author of the foreword for Decker's *Handbook*.

<sup>3</sup> Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Serious Charges against the Tanners: Are the Tanners Demonized Agents of the Mormon Church?* (Salt Lake City: Utah Lighthouse Ministry, 1991), 32, 29. The Tanners' relatively short book offers a remarkable and eye-opening look at the behavior of Ed Decker and some of his associates. (Issue No. 67 [1988] of the Tanners' newsletter, the *Salt Lake City Messenger*, is also interesting in this regard.) Gilbert W. Scharffs, *The TRUTH about "The God Makers"* (Salt Lake City: Publishers Press, 1986), supplies a calmly annotated catalog of many of the errors in Decker's earlier work. Robert L. Brown and Rosemary Brown, *They Lie in Wait to Deceive*, vol. 4 (Mesa: Brownsworth, 1995), is a recently published critical look at Decker and a few of his cronies from *The God Makers*.

highly visible (and audible) for years, and he has bestowed upon the world such signal contributions as "Ex-Mormons for Jesus" and the movie *The God Makers*. Thus experienced students of his astounding career will easily recognize Decker's hoofprints throughout this volume. But his usual mendacity is relatively subdued.<sup>4</sup>

In his *Complete Handbook on Mormonism*, Decker appears to deemphasize some of the fantastic allegations that, over two decades, have earned him both notoriety and a reputedly comfortable living. Although, for instance, he has claimed that the spires of Latter-day Saint churches and temples are satanic nails designed either to pierce God in heaven or to crucify Christ at the second coming, his *Handbook* is silent on the subject.<sup>5</sup> He says nothing, in this volume, about his repeated accusations that agents of the Church have attempted to assassinate him.<sup>6</sup> His *Handbook*, oddly, lacks any entry on "Reactivators," officials in local Mormon congregations whose mission is either to bring back wavering members of the Church or to murder them.<sup>7</sup> He fails to cite the prophecy he repeated throughout 1986 and into 1987 that "the

---

<sup>4</sup> His speculations at page 30, for instance, are a pale echo of his earlier claims on the subject, for which he was deservedly roasted even by his fellow anti-Mormons (e.g., by Jerald and Sandra Tanner in their *The Lucifer-God Doctrine: A Critical Look at Some Recent Charges Relating to the Worship of Lucifer in the Mormon Temple* [Salt Lake City: Utah Lighthouse Ministry, n.d.], 21–23), and in their *The Lucifer-God Doctrine: A Critical Look at Charges of Luciferian Worship in the Mormon Temple, with a Response to the Decker-Schnoebelen Rebuttal*, enl. and rev. ed. (Salt Lake City: Utah Lighthouse Ministry, 1988), 11–15. (Hereafter, the two editions of this work will be referred to as, respectively, *The Lucifer-God Doctrine [A]* and *The Lucifer-God Doctrine [B]*.) Here, as elsewhere (including his wholly implausible equation of "Ahman" and the supposedly evil "Ammon" at pages 33–34), Decker's amateurish attempts to impute guilt by philological association are wholly without linguistic merit.

<sup>5</sup> See the account given by Tanner and Tanner, *Serious Charges against the Tanners*, 7, 28–29; Tanner and Tanner, *The Lucifer-God Doctrine [A]*, 2; Tanner and Tanner, *The Lucifer-God Doctrine [B]*, 2–6.

<sup>6</sup> On Decker's accusations, see the devastating exposé written by the late anti-Mormon crusader Wally Tope, "Poisoned" at Pizzaland: *The Revealing Case of Ed Decker's "Arsenic Poisoning"* (La Canada Flintridge, CA: Frontline Ministries, 1991); also Tanner and Tanner, *Serious Charges against the Tanners*, 32–47.

<sup>7</sup> See *Saints Alive in Jesus Newsletter* (September–October 1993): 2–3.

God of the Jews and Christians” was at war with “the god of the Mormons,” and that, unless the Latter-day Saints relinquished Brigham Young University’s Jerusalem Center for Near Eastern Studies, the waters of the Great Salt Lake would soon rise to engulf both Salt Lake City and its temple.<sup>8</sup> He has nothing to say of the full-scale replica of the White House Oval Office that has been prepared in the Washington D.C. Temple for the day when, following the Mormon revolution, the president of the Church will issue his theocratic dictates from it to the conquered people of the United States.<sup>9</sup> There is, in the *Handbook*, little or nothing of the often disgusting personal libel against living Mormon leaders that distinguished his recent film, *The God Makers II*.<sup>10</sup> And even though one of his trusted associates has claimed to have heard a supposedly explicit admission, by a Latter-day Saint apostle, that Mormons worship Lucifer, not a trace of this important revelation appears in the *Handbook*.<sup>11</sup> Nor does he mention the rituals described in materials he once distributed, during which Latter-day Saint apostles were said not only to slit their own wrists and to write the satanic number 666 on their foreheads, but to use the blood of “diamond back rattlers” and racks of human skulls stored in the Holy of Holies of the Salt Lake Temple.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of this “prophecy,” with references, see Tanner and Tanner, *The Lucifer-God Doctrine [B]*, 16–17. Ironically, in his *Saints Alive in Jesus Newsletter* (May–June 1994): 1, Decker harshly criticizes several of his fellow Protestants for giving false prophecy (on an unrelated subject).

<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, I was unable to locate this priceless allegation in print. However, at least three other dedicated Decker-watchers besides myself remember having seen or heard the claim. And a friend’s July 1995 call to Decker headquarters in Washington State, though it failed to locate a specific written reference, did get a general, implicit repetition of the claim. In a 9 August 1995 telephone call with the same friend, Decker himself denied the notion of a “full-scale replica,” but did confirm that Latter-day Saint leaders will rule the United States from the Washington D.C. Temple.

<sup>10</sup> Once again, even the full-time anti-Mormons Jerald and Sandra Tanner could not stomach Decker’s performance. See their *Problems in The Godmakers II* (Salt Lake City: Utah Lighthouse Ministry, 1993).

<sup>11</sup> See Tanner and Tanner, *Serious Charges against the Tanners*, 21; *Salt Lake City Messenger* 67 (1988): 13–19.

<sup>12</sup> See Tanner and Tanner, *The Lucifer-God Doctrine [A]*, 2–3; Tanner and Tanner, *The Lucifer-God Doctrine [A]*, 8–11.

Some things, however, remain constant. As in previous outings, Decker sees "magic" (pp. 99, 387),<sup>13</sup> "sorcery" (p. 17), and the "occult"<sup>14</sup> everywhere in Mormonism.<sup>15</sup> For him, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is a "juggernaut of generational occultism" (p. 311). He depicts Joseph Smith as "a ceremonial magician—a wizard," "a dedicated and determined student of the black arts, perhaps even a master magician" (p. 382; cf. 413).<sup>16</sup> Indeed, he declares that Mormonism is Satanism, and that its career in the world exemplifies "a dreadful Satanic momentum" (p. 311).<sup>17</sup> Nor are his readers to take this metaphorically. Decker himself claims to take it very seriously indeed. Thus priesthood blessings "may be demonically empowered" because "evil energy is transmitted from the blesser to the blessee," so that "the level of spiritual oppression of many Mormons must be truly appalling in scope" (p. 273). (Elsewhere, Decker has depicted such blessings as having coated individual Latter-day Saints with what he calls a "Satanic 'shellac,'" which has to be peeled off by the ministrations of anti-Mormons.)<sup>18</sup> So, too, fathers' blessings to their children are "frequently . . . a source of grave spiritual oppression later in life," when, because of such blessings, "the spirits of priestcraft . . . surround them" (p. 93). And receiving a patriarchal blessing—for most Latter-day Saints a highlight of their spiritual lives—"is like going to a psychic or a channeler" (p. 321). In fact, the typical Latter-day Saint stake patriarch (whom Decker describes on page 320 as "a man, usually older, who is regarded as being very saintly and absolutely

<sup>13</sup> See, too, Hanegraaff, "Foreword," 5.

<sup>14</sup> See pages 17–18, 54, 90, 158, 180, 203, 211, 216, 286, 299–300, 307–11, 322–24, 361–62, 382, 414.

<sup>15</sup> He draws heavily on the highly questionable work of ex-Mormon historian D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* (Salt Lake City: Signature, 1987). See pages 17, 180, 286, 308–9, 324, 372, 381, 387). Decker explicitly recommends Quinn's book at page 372. But see, as well, the critical reviews of Quinn's book by Stephen E. Robinson, in *BYU Studies* 27 (Fall 1987): 88–95, and by Stephen D. Ricks and Daniel C. Peterson, "The Mormon as Magus," *Sunstone* 12 (January 1988): 38–39.

<sup>16</sup> In this, he goes beyond even Quinn.

<sup>17</sup> See also pages 53–54 (where he badly twists his evidence to make his "case"), 193, 197, 203, 274–77, 302, 400.

<sup>18</sup> *Saints Alive in Jesus Newsletter* (January–February 1994): 4.

above reproach") is really "just like a carnival palm reader. The process he often uses involves a kind of trance communication such as has been used by mediums (channelers) for centuries" (pp. 321–22). "Thus, the poor Mormon [who receives a patriarchal blessing] brings upon himself the curse of God from visiting a false prophet and seeking divination" (p. 322). And the potential consequences are alarming. "For years," Decker claims,

I have had a terrible vision of hardworking, dedicated temple Mormons walking into the throne room of their god, as he sits amid the flames of a burning hell. They stand there, watching, as the beautiful face of the god they have imagined melts away to reveal the terrible secret: The god of their everlasting burnings is really Lucifer. He is laughing, crying out, "I told you from the beginning who I was. You have no excuse." (p. 195)

But does he have evidence for any of this? In his attempt to demonstrate that Mormonism is occult, Decker cites several practices that fall under that category. Among them are "astrology: foretelling one's future or personality composition through the position of the stars at birth," "clairaudience: hearing things inaudible to normal hearing," "clairvoyance: seeing things far away or invisible to normal sight," and "oneiromancy: telling the future or unknown events by dreams" (p. 307). Presumably Latter-day Saints and their leaders are guilty of all of these damnable things, and, so, stand condemned. But wait. Don't the "wise men"—the "magi" [Greek *magoi*—of Matthew 2:1–15 look suspiciously like astrologers? (And isn't their title uncomfortably reminiscent of "magic"?) And think of Paul's experience on the road to Damascus, where, according to one account (Acts 22:6–11), he heard the voice of the Lord while those with him heard nothing. Doesn't that seem a bit like "clairaudience," as Decker defines it? And didn't Jesus himself "see things far away or invisible to normal sight"?<sup>19</sup> And as for "oneiromancy," well,

---

<sup>19</sup> At, for instance, John 1:47–49.

the biblical instances are far too many to count.<sup>20</sup> Finally, what are we to make of Joseph's divining cup, mentioned in Genesis 44:5? And why, incidentally, does Decker's list of occult "forms of divination" not include "cleromancy," the casting of lots? Because it would condemn the apostles in Acts 1:26? Is it possible that Decker is judging the Latter-day Saints by a double standard?

Yes, it is highly possible. And not just in relation to "magic." Of the Kirtland Temple, Decker records that "numerous strange, mystical manifestations took place within its walls, . . . including a supposed hierophany of Jesus and various pseudo-pentecostal manifestations (glossolalia, visions of angels, singing in the spirit, etc.)" (p. 393). Of course, when identical things occur in the Bible (say, for instance, at Pentecost itself), fundamentalists like Decker find them not "strange" or "mystical," but divine. Similarly, Decker denounces as unbiblical the notion advanced by some Latter-day Saint leaders that Joseph Smith will play a (subordinate) role on the Day of Judgment (pp. 373-74). Is he similarly indignant about Matthew 19:28, Luke 22:29-30, and I Corinthians 6:2-3? If so, he shows no sign of it.

No, the point of Decker's volume is not to give a balanced or fair picture of Mormonism. It is, rather, to frighten, alienate, and disgust his readers. This is hardly a surprise, of course. "Ed has a penchant," says his former associate and costar in *The God Makers*, the veteran anti-Mormon Dick Baer, "to sensationalize, embellish on facts and center on bizarre issues to try to shock people."<sup>21</sup> Decker briefly acknowledges—as he must, given the easily demonstrated appeal of the restored gospel to millions of people—that there are some seemingly good things about The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. "The tragedy of Mormonism is that mixed among the sweets are these little doses of darkness, revealing the true nature of the thing that lies just beneath the surface. Mormonism is like a photo negative of the truth: black where white should be, and difficult to see unless held up to strong light" (p. 195; cf. 358). Ed Decker is the man who will make the world see. "The spiritual havoc that Mormonism

---

<sup>20</sup> Just for starters, one might take a look at Genesis 37:5-11; 40:5-23; 41:1-36; Daniel 2:1-49; Matthew 2:12-13, 19, 22.

<sup>21</sup> Interviewed in the *Sacramento Union*, 26 December 1992, cited by Tanner and Tanner, *Problems in The Godmakers II*, 4.



wreaks in its claim to be the pure holder of true Christianity cannot be overestimated," he reports. "Day after day the 'one true church' grinds up countless people in the monstrous gears of its theology—spitting out wretched, frightened human beings who have all but given up on God, any God" (p. 137). And were one to ask for some statistics or other evidence to sustain this accusation? Don't waste your breath.

"It is obvious," Decker says, "that the Mormon church does not want to wear the label of a cult, but the very word *cult* describes a group at stress with the mainstream. Our work has been to turn up that stress volume and break people away and back into mainstream Christianity" (p. 397). In other words, he seeks not to inform, but to inflame. Accordingly, despite its claims, this is *not* a "Complete Handbook." The article on Joseph Smith, for instance, contains no biography or chronology, merely assault after assault. People hoping for a complete picture of Mormonism, or seeking to understand its history and doctrine, will have to look elsewhere. Every entry is an attack. The only article on the Doctrine and Covenants is entitled "Doctrine and Covenants, Changes in." There is an entry entitled "Angel of Light," designed to prove that Moroni was really just the opposite, but no general entry treating Latter-day Saint doctrine on "Angels." Decker includes discussions of "Gospel Hobbies," "Idolatry," and "Money Digging," but offers nothing on missionary service, the welfare program, or the sacrament.

Moreover, to accomplish the goal of "turning up the tension," Decker pulls out all the rhetorical stops. Throughout the book, Mormonism is dismissed as "silly," "peculiar," "eccentric," "weird," "absurd."<sup>22</sup> It is "pagan"—in Decker's view, for instance, "eternal marriage is a subtle form of idolatry"—and "accursed."<sup>23</sup> Latter-day Saint beliefs and practices are

---

<sup>22</sup> See, respectively, pages 29, 364 (also Hanegraaff, "Foreword," 6); pages 146, 392–93; pages 323, 345; page 90; and page 28. This is typical of his language. Elsewhere, for instance, he has termed Mormon beliefs "blasphemous tripe." See *Saints Alive in Jesus Newsletter* (November–December 1994): 4.

<sup>23</sup> See, respectively, pages 177–78, 229; page 206; page 330.

“bizarre,” “odd,” “strange,” “alien.”<sup>24</sup> What Mormons hold sacred is merely “nonsense,” “superstitious nonsense,” and “foolishness.”<sup>25</sup> Doctrine and Covenants 93 is a “hodgepodge of insane prattle” (p. 40). The Latter-day Saint view of the plan of salvation is “foolishness” (p. 269), temple worship is “a fool’s errand” (p. 69), and “Mormons are living in a fool’s paradise” (p. 148). Mormons and their leaders are “cultists.”<sup>26</sup> But Mormonism is not only “a non-Christian cult,”<sup>27</sup> not only “pseudo-Christian” (p. 392), but “anti-Christian” (p. 97), and its teachings are “vicious” (p. 292). The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is nothing but “spiritual darkness in action” (p. 358). It is “deceptive,” and the Latter-day Saints “have been deceived and are buried in lies from their leaders.”<sup>28</sup> In fact, it is doubtful that Mormonism should even be granted the status of a religion. For Mormon leaders are “pretenders” (p. 304).<sup>29</sup> Mormonism is “an act—a counterfeit faith” (p. 397; cf. 400) and Latter-day Saint worship, he implies, is mere masquerade: It is only

<sup>24</sup> See, respectively, pages 18, 22, 113, 299, 323, 358, 414; pages 100, 108, 113, 186, 188, 193, 197, 275, 361; pages 72–73, 99, 132, 186, 193, 255, 273, 279, 280, 361, 393; page 323.

<sup>25</sup> See, respectively, pages 22, 189; page 387; page 28.

<sup>26</sup> See pages 43, 74, 133, 159, 160, 207, 239, 253, 413. Apparently fearing that readers will resist regarding the Latter-day Saints they have known as “cultists,” Decker advises them to “Remember that Mormonism is something of a soft-core cult, with a happy facade” (p. 159). I do not think that his phrasing (reminiscent of “soft-core pornography”) was chosen at random. For an examination of the claim that Mormonism is a “cult,” see Daniel C. Peterson and Stephen D. Ricks, *Offenders for a Word: How Anti-Mormons Play Word Games to Attack the Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Aspen Books, 1992), 193–212.

<sup>27</sup> Hanegraaff, “Foreword,” 6.

<sup>28</sup> See, respectively, pages 29, 54, 60, 70, 180, 196, 415; page 160 (on which Decker himself immediately proceeds to tell a huge whopper: “They really believe they can be justified through works” [page 160]). Thus Joseph Smith’s introduction of temple ordinances “simply added that new level of deception to an already-towering Babel-like edifice of theological intricacy” (p. 180).

<sup>29</sup> Decker often presumes, rather than demonstrates, the hypocrisy of Mormons and their leaders. (See, for example, page 170; page 176, on which the confirming testimony of eyewitnesses is conveniently ignored; and page 199, on which the doctrine of eternal progression is merely “a doctrine of devils . . . added by Joseph Smith to feed his own pride.”) Decker knows the real motives for Mormon revelations—and they are always sordid (as at pp. 290–91). They are merely “revelations of convenience” (p. 340).

“ ‘worship’ ” (p. 393).<sup>30</sup> Accordingly, Ed Decker generally refuses to capitalize the title of the being whom Latter-day Saints claim to reverence.<sup>31</sup> “The LDS god,” he reveals, “is so far down the spiritual food chain from the biblical God that he might as well be a protozoan” (p. 328).

How can so many accept this “nonbiblical fantasy” (p. 420) and “the far-fetched revelations it has foisted on humanity”?<sup>32</sup> “How millions can take the Book of Mormon seriously,” says Hank Hanegraaff in his “Foreword” to the *Handbook*, “is almost beyond comprehension.”<sup>33</sup> The answer, of course, is that Mormons are preternaturally stupid.<sup>34</sup> For “the entire LDS church falls like a house of cards before the clear light of reason and the Bible” (p. 397). But Latter-day Saints, both leaders and led, are “frightfully ignorant”<sup>35</sup> and ordinary Mormons are both

---

<sup>30</sup> This is evidently becoming a favorite anti-Mormon put-down. See, for instance, Mark J. Cares, *Speaking the Truth in Love to Mormons* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing, 1993), 136: “Mormonism, because it is a thoroughly man-centered religion, has no true concept of worship. True worship is foreign to LDS culture.” (It is difficult to imagine a more obvious case of lexical imperialism. If they don’t worship just as we do, say the critics, it isn’t worship.)

<sup>31</sup> As at pages 50–51, 53, 64–65, 98, 113, 119, 157, 174, 195, 227, 263–64, 274, 303, 305, 328, 333, 345, 355, 369–70, 372, 388, 417. On page 227, Decker dismisses the Father worshiped by Latter-day Saints as a mere “man/god.” At page 59, Decker reveals that “Mormons don’t worship ‘Almighty God’ at all, but just a mythical, extraterrestrial superhuman being.” Throughout his *Handbook*, Decker is given to the use of loaded language like this. Thus, for instance, Brigham Young’s tenure as president of the Church is caricatured as his “reign” (p. 172).

<sup>32</sup> For the latter phrase, see Hanegraaff, “Foreword,” 6.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* Decker calls the story of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon “a legend of classic proportion” (p. 400).

<sup>34</sup> Decker betrays signs of more than merely anti-Mormon bigotry. Note the anti-Arab racism on page 22 and his classic anti-Catholic slur against “the vast wealth of the Vatican and its effete priesthood caste” on page 329. At page 332, Decker compares some elements of Mormonism to Roman Catholicism. The comparison is scarcely intended to flatter either Mormons or Catholics.

<sup>35</sup> Decker observes that “Joseph Smith had little or no knowledge of Bible history and tradition” (p. 20). Here is something on which we can agree—though almost certainly not in the sense he intends. Joseph Smith’s achievement is all the greater (and the more miraculous) when one realizes how little earthly knowledge he had.

“spiritually blind” and “slavish.”<sup>36</sup> Indeed, Decker has observed elsewhere, “the Mormons seem to have had their minds zapped by aliens when it comes to logic and Biblical truth.”<sup>37</sup>

How did Mormons get into this frightful state? Through lust and arrogance, evidently. Decker describes the Latter-day Saint conception of the afterlife as one of “endless, Celestial sex” (p. 267)<sup>38</sup> by which, he says, Mormons hope to “spawn new families throughout eternity” (p. 268).<sup>39</sup> This is part of their motivation. But Decker also claims that pious Latter-day Saints who have served in the temples for the redemption of the dead “believe that when they die and go to wherever they go, many people will come up and kiss their feet and thank them” (p. 68). They are prideful and vainglorious.<sup>40</sup> Thus, Decker asserts, when Latter-day Saints point to their lack of a professional clergy, this is simply their characteristic boastful “chest-thumping” (p. 145). And there is virtually no limit to their egocentrism: “As is true of most cults, . . . Mormons remove the focus of attention from Jesus Christ and turn it on themselves” (p. 207).

Obviously, Ed Decker needs some potent justifications for employing this contemptuous and hostile language against the Latter-day Saints. In the pages that follow, we will see how he provides himself with those justifications.

### Decker's Abuse of Mormons, Past and Present

In his “Foreword,” Hank Hanegraaff announces that, by the writing of this *Handbook*, Ed Decker “has distinguished himself”

---

<sup>36</sup> See respectively, pages 55, 153; pages 104–5 (cf. 253); page 312 (cf. 253). On page 365, Decker falsely asserts that LDS leaders “claim to have divine fiat for everything” they say. His statement directly contradicts Joseph Smith’s famous remark that “a prophet was a prophet only when he was acting as such.” See *DHC* 5:265.

<sup>37</sup> *Saints Alive in Jesus Newsletter* (November–December 1994): 4.

<sup>38</sup> Hanegraaff, “Foreword,” 7, uses precisely the same phrase, and I have also heard him use it on the radio. It seems to be a favorite in certain anti-Mormon circles. Perhaps they find it titillating.

<sup>39</sup> Nonetheless, on page 204 Decker flatly contradicts himself by suggesting, ridiculously, that Mormons believe that “the act of procreation is evil to God.”

<sup>40</sup> For other allegations of Latter-day Saint arrogance, see pages 199, 270, 276, 302, 366–67, 406, 411.

as a scholar.<sup>41</sup> One scarcely knows whether to laugh or to cry. On page 281, Decker seems to think that there are still priesthood groups of "Seventy" on the stake and ward level. (Their discontinuation was announced at a general conference of the Church on 4 October 1986.) By page 340, he realizes that they no longer exist. But few of his egregious errors and distortions are so innocent. A few representative examples will suffice:

### Joseph Smith as a "False Prophet"

• "Deuteronomy 18:20–22 states," according to Decker, "that *one* false prophecy disqualifies a 'prophet' from consideration forever as a true prophet" (p. 245, emphasis in the original). Of course, that is not precisely what it says. As one prestigious commentary remarks of the passage,

Prophecy in the names of other gods is easily rejected, but false prophecy in God's name is a more serious matter. This dilemma requires the application of a pragmatic criterion that, although clearly useless for judgments on individual oracles, is certainly a way to evaluate a prophet's overall performance.<sup>42</sup>

Decker's rule is also much too simple because it fails to notice the fact that God himself can change his mind and abrogate what he had already revealed. I cite, in this connection, the words of the Lord to the prophet Jeremiah:

---

<sup>41</sup> Hanegraaff, "Foreword," 5. Hanegraaff is prone to exaggerating Decker's qualifications. "For 20 years," he claims on the same page of his "Foreword," "Ed Decker served as a missionary for the Mormon church." This sounds rather official, and naive non-Mormons will, no doubt, be impressed. But in an explanatory note (on p. 431), Hanegraaff says that Decker had been "an active participant in the Mormon church's 'Every member a missionary' program." Informed readers will not be precisely bowled over. (I recall a television program in California from years ago that, in passing, described a certain grizzled old desert rat as devoutly religious, "a priest in the Mormon Church"—which probably left some viewers imagining him as ranking right up there with the Mormon pope.)

<sup>42</sup> James L. Mays, ed., *Harper's Bible Commentary* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), 226. This commentary was a project of the Society of Biblical Literature, the premier group of Bible scholars in North America.

At what instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, and to pull down, and to destroy it;

If that nation, against whom I have pronounced, turn from their evil, I will repent of the evil that I thought to do unto them.

And at what instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant it;

If it do evil in my sight, that it obey not my voice, then I will repent of the good, wherewith I said I would benefit them. (Jeremiah 18:7–10)

Furthermore, readers of the Bible (and not just the Mormons among them) would be wise to allow prophets to err and be human. If they refuse, they may have no prophets left at all—neither latter-day nor biblical. Consider, for instance, the case of Ezekiel: Ezekiel 29 consists of two prophecies that announce Egypt's destruction at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar (29:1–16 and 17–21). What is most interesting for my present purpose is 29:17–21. Although the prophecy recorded there foretells the fall of Egypt, its greatest revelation has to do with Ezekiel's earlier predictions, given in chapters 26–28, that Tyre would be destroyed and plundered by Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon.

Those predictions simply had not been fulfilled. Nebuchadnezzar had apparently attempted for about thirteen years (ca. 586–573 B.C.) to conquer Tyre, but the results had been less than satisfactory. Tyre was located off the shore of the mainland, and was therefore extraordinarily difficult to conquer by the conventional means that the Babylonians had employed elsewhere. (Typically, they had used siege warfare that involved the massive deployment of land troops and siege machinery.) Apparently, the Babylonian siege ended with some kind of compromise, in a negotiated settlement. Ezekiel 29:18–20 makes it clear that the plunder that Ezekiel's earlier prophecy had promised to the Babylonians did not, in fact, materialize. Therefore, as compen-

sation for their failure to conquer Tyre, the Lord announced through Ezekiel that he would give *Egypt* to the Babylonians!<sup>43</sup>

By Decker's rule, Ezekiel was a false prophet, and the Old Testament is a fraud. But he does not apply his standard to the Bible. Joseph Smith is his quarry, and it is only the Latter-day Saints that he wants in his crosshairs. This, to put it mildly, is unfair. It is another illustration of his double standard.

- To set Joseph Smith up as a false prophet, Decker triumphantly trots out statements that have absolutely no apparent predictive intent, yet treats them as if they were supposed to be prophecies. And, although he has just quoted them himself, so that any careful reader can easily see that his declaration is false, he asserts that Joseph Smith used the formula "thus saith the Lord" in them (see, for example, pp. 170–72; cf. 289–90).

- Decker uses Doctrine and Covenants 84:2–5, 31 to establish that Joseph Smith was a false prophet (pp. 245–46, 370). He fails to mention Doctrine and Covenants 124:49–51, however—presumably because it would weaken his case. (It sounds very like the application of a principle similar to that enunciated at Jeremiah 18:7–10, quoted above.) He also fails to mention Matthew 24:34, Mark 13:30, and Luke 21:32, which bear striking resemblance to the supposedly false prophecy of Doctrine and Covenants 84:2–5, 31.

### Misuse of the Joseph Smith Story

- In order to portray Joseph Smith as a hypocrite for becoming a Mason after his First Vision, Decker defines Freemasonry as a religion (pp. 371–72). But this is merely his own idiosyncratic view. Advocates and adherents of Freemasonry invariably deny both that it is a religious sect and that it contradicts more specific religious creeds; in addition, it is very common for members and even pastors of various denominations to be Freemasons.<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup> I thank my colleague Prof. Kent P. Jackson for bringing this case to my attention some years ago.

<sup>44</sup> See, for instance, Albert G. Mackey, William J. Hughan, and Edward L. Hawkins, eds., *An Encyclopædia of Freemasonry*, 2 vols. (New York and London: Masonic History Company, 1918), 2:617–19; Robert Macoy, *A Dictionary of Freemasonry* (New York: Bell, 1989), 324–25; Albert Pike, *Morals and*

• Quoting Joseph Smith, Decker claims that Joseph Smith's descriptions of Moroni and of Satanic angels are identical (p. 36). But they are not. For instance, Joseph suggests that the color of the angel's hair is one crucial clue, and, in the specific case of an evil angel to which he refers, the masquerading messenger has "sandy colored hair."<sup>45</sup> Moroni's hair is *not* described as "sandy colored" (see Joseph Smith—History 1:31–32). On the basis of 2 Nephi 9:9, Decker concludes that, since Moroni was an "angel of light," he must necessarily have been an angel of the devil (pp. 35–37). But, obviously, being an "angel of light" would not automatically make a supernatural messenger demonic; the whole point of Satan's light-masquerade is to make himself and his emissaries look like true messengers from God. If there were no such authentic divine messengers, dressing up in borrowed light would be completely useless.

• On pages 216, 286, and 372, Decker claims that Joseph Smith was convicted of "glass looking" before Justice Albert Neely on 20 March 1826. Recent scholarship, however, suggests that Joseph was acquitted.<sup>46</sup>

• Decker describes Joseph Smith as a "teller of tall tales" and refers for support to Lucy Mack Smith's biography of her son as if it justified his accusation (pp. 372–73)—which it emphatically does not.

• Decker has the gall to assault the testimony of the Witnesses to the Book of Mormon—in effect indulging in historical character assassination—without ever coming to grips with, or even mentioning, the superb scholarship that has been devoted to them (pp. 400–404).<sup>47</sup> Two years ago, responding to a similar attack, I wrote that

*Dogma of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry* (Charleston: Supreme Council of the Southern Jurisdiction, 1906), 219.

<sup>45</sup> DHC 4:581.

<sup>46</sup> See Gordon A. Madsen, "Joseph Smith's 1826 Trial: The Legal Setting," *BYU Studies* 30/2 (Spring 1990): 91–108.

<sup>47</sup> For recent responses to specific criticisms of the Witnesses, see Matthew Roper's review of Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?* in *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 4 (1992): 170–76; Matthew Roper, "Comments on the Book of Mormon Witnesses: A Response to Jerald and Sandra Tanner," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2/2 (Fall 1993): 164–93; William J. Hamblin, "An Apologist for the Critics: Brent Lee



It is outrageous that . . . purported scholars of Mormonism would pretend, in 1992, to have examined the evidence on the Witnesses sufficiently to reject their testimony, without refuting—nay, without once referring to or citing—the works of Eldin Ricks (1961), Milton Backman (1983), Rhett James (1983), and especially Richard Lloyd Anderson (1981).<sup>48</sup> . . . And new evidence supporting the veracity of the Witnesses continues to appear. I cannot see how anyone can possibly read Lyndon Cook's recently published anthology of *David Whitmer Interviews* and imagine for a moment that David Whitmer was an "unreliable man" who merely thought he "may have seen" the angel and the plates.<sup>49</sup> It is awfully difficult to remain patient with this sort of slipshod pseudoscholarship.<sup>50</sup>

And it is not getting any easier. Decker's abuse of the Witnesses in this section of the *Handbook* is a perfect illustration of what Professor Richard Lloyd Anderson warned against in 1981:

The first anti-Mormon book was written in 1834 . . . and set the precedent, . . . devoting most space to show them to be either superstitious or dishonest. This became a formula: ignore the testimony and attack the

---

Metcalf's Assumptions and Methodologies," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 6/1 (1994): 506–20. On page 402, Decker falsely alleges that Oliver Cowdery denied his testimony. For the truth of the matter, see Roper, "Comments on the Book of Mormon Witnesses," 173–76.

<sup>48</sup> Eldin Ricks, *The Case of the Book of Mormon Witnesses* (Salt Lake City: Olympus, 1961); Milton V. Backman, Jr., *Eyewitness Accounts of the Restoration* (Orem: Grandin Book, 1983), republished in 1986 by Deseret Book; Rhett S. James, *The Man Who Knew: The Early Years* (Cache Valley: Martin Harris Pageant Committee, 1983), dealing with Martin Harris; Richard Lloyd Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981). Fascinating collateral materials are supplied by Susan Easton Black, ed., *Stories from the Early Saints: Converted by the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1992), which I reviewed in *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 4 (1992): 13–19.

<sup>49</sup> Lyndon W. Cook, ed., *David Whitmer Interviews: A Restoration Witness* (Orem: Grandin Book, 1991).

<sup>50</sup> Daniel C. Peterson, "Chattanooga Cheapshot, or The Gall of Bitterness," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 5 (1993): 48–49.

witness. . . . That method is sure to caricature its victims: lead off with the worst names anyone ever called them, take all charges as presented without investigating, solidify mistakes as lifelong characteristics, and ignore all positive accomplishments or favorable judgments on their lives. Such bad methods will inevitably produce bad men on paper. The only problem with this treatment is that it cheats the consumer—it appears to investigate personality without really doing so.<sup>51</sup>

- Decker brings up the well-known fact that the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon lists Joseph Smith as “author and proprietor” of the book, rather than, as in modern editions, as “translator” (pp. 109–10). Yet he never says precisely what this is supposed to prove. Is he seriously arguing that, as late as 1830, Joseph Smith was admitting the Book of Mormon to be fiction and himself to be its author? Of course not. Besides, “recent research into early federal copyright laws clearly explains that this terminology is not a problem because it is consistent with early nineteenth-century practice.”<sup>52</sup> The results of this research have been widely available for several years; Ed Decker could easily have known about it.

- On pages 366–67, Decker cites the *Documentary History of the Church* 6:408–9 as evidence that Joseph Smith was an arrogant boaster.<sup>53</sup> But the *History of the Church* itself describes that passage as resting upon a “synopsis” by Thomas Bullock. Is it, therefore, a primary source? The date of the sermon is 26 May

---

<sup>51</sup> Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, 166.

<sup>52</sup> See John W. Welch, ed., *Reexploring the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992), 154–57. The quotation is from page 154.

<sup>53</sup> On page 411, Decker—the cover of whose book bears his name not merely once, but twice, and in large letters—calls Joseph Smith “melodramatic” and “egomaniacal.” Incidentally, for what it may be worth, the eminent New Testament scholar Krister Stendahl (former dean of Harvard Divinity School and Lutheran Bishop Emeritus of Stockholm) considers the Apostle Paul to have been “a terrible braggart,” “egocentric,” and “blatantly arrogant.” See Krister Stendahl, *Final Account: Paul's Letter to the Romans* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 3–5, 14. One need not agree with this judgment; I suspect that Decker would reject it on principle, while applying to Joseph Smith a standard that he would never apply to Paul.

1844. A month later, the Prophet was dead. Did he supervise this entry? No. The last years—*years!*—of his entries in the *Documentary History of the Church* were actually made by others, after his death, in an attempt, consistent with the historiographical practices of the day, to complete the narrative.<sup>54</sup> They based their work on other eyewitness accounts and contemporary journals of other people, often transforming third-person narratives into the first person. This point is vitally important to keep in mind when trying to assess the character of Joseph Smith, his moral and spiritual quality, through the so-called “Documentary History.”<sup>55</sup>

The impression I myself get of Joseph Smith from reading his *authenticated* statements is of a humble and sincere man, struggling to do the will of God as he understood it. However, even if a note of proud defiance *had* crept into Joseph’s tone during a speech in Nauvoo when both city and Church were under pressure from gangs of unprincipled bigots, I for one would not have blamed him.

On the general reliability of the *Documentary History of the Church*, by the way, I think it worth saying that, in view of the way it was put together, it is not the overall thrust or narrative that is likely to be inaccurate, but the nuances, the tone, the details. This is precisely the opposite problem from that which anti-Mormons would have us see in it: They think the overall story of the *History* incorrect (e.g., divine intervention, revelation, Joseph Smith’s prophetic calling, etc.), but want us to accept the details of tone and mood—at least when those details seem to put the Prophet in a bad light. (Amusing, isn’t it?, that the very same people who vehemently reject the *Documentary History of the Church* as an unreliable source when it seems to support the Latter-day Saint

---

<sup>54</sup> On this, consult Dean C. Jessee, “The Reliability of Joseph Smith’s History,” *The Journal of Mormon History* 3 (1976): 23–46, and the following pamphlets: Dean C. Jessee, *Has the History of the Church Been Deliberately Falsified?* (Sandy: Mormon Miscellaneous, 1982), and Van Hale, *Comparing the Writing of the History of the Church with the Writing of the New Testament Gospels* (Sandy: Mormon Miscellaneous, 1989).

<sup>55</sup> Dean C. Jessee’s “Preface” to his collection of *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984), xiii–xix, specifically addresses the issue of the seeming egotism that enters into Joseph’s later statements *as edited by well-meaning others*, but which is apparently quite foreign to the man himself.

position clutch it to their bosoms as an unparalleled historical treasure when they think they can use it as a weapon against the alleged errors of Mormonism.)

- Wisely without citing any source, Decker informs his readers that “the Mormons thank God for Joseph Smith, who claimed that he had done more for us than any other man, including Jesus Christ” (pp. 268–69).<sup>56</sup> Where did Joseph Smith make such an outrageous claim? He didn’t. Nor is it even thinkable that any Christian would. In fact, the very wording of Decker’s accusation shows its dependence on Doctrine and Covenants 135:3. But that verse, written by John Taylor as part of the Church’s formal announcement of the murder of Joseph Smith by anti-Mormons, directly contradicts Decker’s claim: “Joseph Smith, the Prophet and Seer of the Lord, has done more, *save Jesus only*, for the salvation of men in this world, than any other man that ever lived in it” (emphasis added).

### **Mormons as Mind-Numbed Robots**

Since “bearing testimony” or “bearing witness” is one of the chief ways in which Latter-day Saints attempt to share their faith with others, Decker concentrates his fire upon it. “A Mormon’s testimony,” he claims, “is usually *not* extemporaneous. It is virtually a memorized, rote litany of statements about the Mormon church. It does not vary much—at least in the beginning” (p. 207, emphasis in the original). But Decker’s version of Mormon testimonies goes much beyond this:

A typical fast and testimony meeting might have up to a dozen people getting up and saying, “I bear you my testimony that . . .” and, at that point, the eyes begin to glaze over, even as they begin to brim with tears. This is especially true because lifelong Mormons have been encouraged to get up and bear their testimony since they were knee-high to a seagull. They are also encouraged to bear it in any religious discussion

---

<sup>56</sup> On page 325, Decker self-contradictorily portrays the Latter-day Saints as subordinating Joseph Smith to Jesus Christ—though not by much. Even this claim, however, is slanderous and false.

they might be having, especially with an investigator of the church—again with as much weeping and heartfelt emotion as can possibly be generated.

The net result of years of this is a mind-control phenomenon—an autohypnotic trance state which the sincere Mormon generates without even realizing it anytime he starts to bear his testimony. The next time you are with a Mormon and he begins to bear you his testimony, watch his eyes carefully. Often his pupils will begin to dilate, even as he begins to drone, “I want to solemnly bear you *my* testimony that God lives,” etc. He will frequently drop into a state of clinical autohypnosis. You can almost watch the tape recorder running behind his forehead, playing the message for you. . . . It is often instructive to gently but firmly interrupt when a Mormon is bearing his testimony. . . . Watch the eyes of the Mormon at this point. You can almost see the “Tilt” signs going off. Nothing in his entire life has prepared him for having his testimony derailed in mid-recitation. Some recover quickly, but others actually reel back, their eyes glazed over like marbles, trying to get reoriented. This is because you have prematurely called them out of a hypnotic state. (pp. 208–9)

The obvious intent of this bit of patent Deckerism is to distract the Mormon’s listeners from what he or she is saying, and to focus their attention on his or her face and eyes instead, as well as to portray Latter-day Saints as something alien (rather like the hypnotized communist agents of the classic paranoid thriller *The Manchurian Candidate*). But it is rather typical of his technique, in the sense that it is manifestly untrue and easily testable. The problem is that most of his audience will never actually test Decker’s claim; a substantial proportion, no doubt, will reason (not knowing him) that he would not dare to say such a thing unless it were true. (On 19 July 1992, when I questioned him during a conversation carried on the radio program *Religion on the Line* [KTKK, 630 AM, Salt Lake City], Decker affirmed that Latter-day Saints bearing testimony are brainwashed automatons whose eyes dilate and whose words never deviate even slightly

from the predetermined text that has been imposed upon them by their priesthood masters. When I challenged listeners to test his veracity by simply going to a Mormon testimony meeting and listening, Decker too urged them to do so! One can only marvel at so shameless a deployment of what has been termed "the Big Lie technique.")

- Decker claims that the Church fears people who think "that you can read and understand the Bible without the help of the brethren" and is terrified that some of its members might "come to [think] that you can get truth from God without the help of the church hierarchy" (p. 90). That is why, I suppose, the Church spends so much time and money and effort on Gospel Doctrine classes, seminaries, institutes of religion, religious instruction in its colleges, and improved editions of its scriptures. And that must also be the reason for the Church's emphasis on personal revelation and testimony.

### **Latter-day Saints as Murderous Traitors**

Ed Decker uses brazen distortion of the Mormon past to create a threatening portrait of contemporary Mormonism. Consider the following instances:

- "Utah under Brigham Young," claims Decker, had "very little social or religious freedom" (p. 187). Where is his evidence for this? It would be useful, I think, to permit two eminent historians of Mormonism to sketch the reign of religious terror that existed in Brigham Young's Utah:

By the end of the 1860s other denominations were beginning to establish themselves in the territory. The Church made no effort to keep out other faiths and sometimes cooperated by letting them use Mormon chapels until they could build their own meeting places.

Among the first non-Mormons in Utah were Jews, some of whom came as merchants and businessmen as early as 1854. Strong friendships grew between the Jews and the Mormons, and more than once Brigham Young made Mormon church buildings available for Jewish religious services.

Roman Catholics came to Utah in 1862 as members of the California Volunteers. In 1866 when the Reverend Edward Kelly was looking for a place to celebrate mass, he was allowed to use the old tabernacle, and Brigham Young helped him obtain a clear title to land for a cathedral. Though the Catholics and the Latter-day Saints had little in common religiously, they maintained generally good will. The Reverend Lawrence Scanlan arrived in Utah in 1873 . . . and on one occasion in 1873 was invited by Mormon leaders in St. George to use their tabernacle for worship. Fearful that some of the service would have to be omitted because it called for a choir singing in Latin, he learned to his surprise that the leader of the St. George Tabernacle choir had asked for the appropriate music, and in two weeks the choir would sing it in Latin. On May 18 a Catholic high mass was sung by a Mormon choir in the St. George Tabernacle, symbolizing the good will that existed between Father Scanlan and the Saints.<sup>57</sup>

- Decker makes wild accusations of murder against early Latter-day Saints, with no more evidence to support his slanders than a throw-away line from Mark Twain (p. 99): “Though today LDS leaders will deny it,” he says, “there were marauding bands of theocratic vigilantes known as ‘Danites’ or ‘Avenging Angels’—almost a Mormon Ku Klux Klan—who would often [often!] exact fearsome retribution upon any who were seen to be out of order with the rulers of the church” (p. 119; cf. 132, 166–67). Of course, modern Latter-day Saints do deny such tales, for the simple reason that they are not true.<sup>58</sup>

- But even if untrue, for Ed Decker the mythical Mormon past is merely prologue to the sordid Mormon present. “Deep in Mormon country (Utah, Idaho, etc.),” he alleges, “wives who are perceived as not submitting properly to their husbands are sometimes treated to church-directed correction”—by which he means

---

<sup>57</sup> James B. Allen and Glen M. Leonard, *The Story of the Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 340–41.

<sup>58</sup> On this subject, see David J. Whittaker, “Danites,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 1:356–57. Dr. Whittaker is the leading authority on the subject.

violent "correction" or "chastisement" (p. 132; cf. 306).<sup>59</sup> This is a very, very serious charge. Where is his evidence? How often is "sometimes"? Can he name a single case? The charge doesn't even make much sense. Why would such horrors take place only "deep in Mormon country"? Does Latter-day Saint theology in California and Tahiti and Sweden differ on this point?

• Decker points to the patriarchal character of Mormonism and declares that women in the Church are frequently virtual slaves to their husbands, who "stand in the place of God" to them (p. 306). Yet this is an extraordinary criticism for a fundamentalist Protestant to make, committed as he is to the inspired, inerrant character of scriptural passages like Ephesians 5:22–24. Characteristically, too, he has offered no proof whatever for his charge against the Latter-day Saints. Surely, if the situation is as bad as he paints it, there should be plenty of evidence for the bondage of Mormon women to oppressive little would-be deities. Unconcerned with evidence, however, and undeterred by his own inconsistency, Decker denounces Mormonism as "a combination of legalism and sexual oppression" (p. 307). In fact, Mormon teaching expressly condemns the kind of thing that Decker says is central to it. Consider, for example, the words of Elder James E. Faust, who currently serves in the First Presidency of the Church: "Holding the priesthood does not mean that a man is a power-broker, or that he sits on a throne, dictating in macho terms, or that he is superior in any way. . . . Nowhere does the doctrine of this Church declare that men are superior to women."<sup>60</sup>

• Decker devotes two paragraphs to the utterly false notion that Latter-day Saint women will be dependent upon their husbands for their resurrection. "No wonder LDS women feel so spiritually oppressed!" (pp. 298–99). But where is the evidence

---

<sup>59</sup> At the time of writing, Decker continues to circulate outlandish stories about domestic life among the Latter-day Saints. (See, for example, the March–May 1995 issue of his *Saints Alive in Jesus Newsletter*, 2, where he cites an anonymous "letter" that, to anybody who knows how the Church really works, rings false at virtually every turn.)

<sup>60</sup> James E. Faust, "The Highest Place of Honor," *Ensign* 18 (May 1988): 36–38; the quotation is from page 36. Compare, among many, many other items, Yoshihiko Kikuchi, "Daughter of God," *Ensign* 18 (May 1988): 76–77; Boyd K. Packer, "A Tribute to Women," *Ensign* 19 (July 1989): 72–75. My thanks to Alison Coutts for these references.



that they *do*? He provides none. (It's rather like the old question about whether so-and-so has stopped beating his wife.) Is there any reason to believe that they suffer from depression more than do their neighbors from fundamentalist Protestant backgrounds?

- Yet Decker's lurid, fictional Latter-day Saint present pales in comparison to the sinister plots that his imaginary Latter-day Saints are hatching for the future. Mormons, he says, are disloyal (pp. 303–4), and they are planning to set up “a *political* kingdom, not a spiritual one” (p. 149, emphasis in the original).<sup>61</sup> In fact, their schemes are already well underway. Decker claims, without mentioning any evidence, that Latter-day Saints in the FBI routinely feed presumably classified information to leaders of the Church. “There have been rumors [*rumors!*] of ‘special assignments’ being handled for the LDS leaders by faithful FBI agents. These agents can be rewarded upon retirement from the agency with well-paying jobs in the church’s ‘private army,’ the LDS Church Security” (p. 149). (Note the vagueness, the presumed code-phrases suggestively placed within quotation marks. What are these dark-sounding “special assignments”? Assassinations? Inventing AIDS?)

Professional ethical codes or even national laws can be set aside by doctors, lawyers, or psychiatrists who are asked to do “a little something” to further the cause of the kingdom of God. Because there is no effort to distinguish between the LDS church’s private goals and agenda and the kingdom of God, this can mean that any Mormon who was in the right place could be asked at a time of crisis to do just about anything to anyone in the name of the church and be bound to it by their vow to obey the Law of Consecration. . . . This is why Mormons in high positions of government and the military can be worrisome. This oath they have taken in

---

<sup>61</sup> Dedicated students of the Decker phenomenon will remember the implicit portrayal of ordinary Latter-day Saints as dangerous armed revolutionaries in his film *Temples of the God Makers*. There is, of course, just the slightest grain of truth in Decker’s accusation: Mormons believe and take seriously such prophetic passages as Daniel 2:44; 7:18, 22, 27; 1 Corinthians 6:2; Revelation 22:15.

their minds supersedes the oath they took to protect and defend the Constitution. Such people bear careful watching. (pp. 149–50)

They believe it is their destiny to seize the reins of power in America and turn it into a theocracy, a religious dictatorship, led by a prophet-king who would be the supreme earthly head of the Melchizedek priesthood. . . . Should the Mormons ever succeed in creating their church-state, it would be a country very much like Utah under Brigham Young. That is to say, it will have very little social or religious freedom. Mormons might criminalize abortion, pornography, and homosexuality, but they might also criminalize soul-winning efforts by Bible-believing Christians (p. 187).<sup>62</sup>

This is hardly a new theme for Decker. In the book version of *The God Makers*, published in 1984 and still widely available in mainstream secular bookstores as well as “Christian” outlets, he and his coauthor described The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as a “dictatorship” and compared it to “secret revolutionary groups,” predicting “an attempted takeover by force or subterfuge through political means.” They declared that, among Latter-day Saints, “the obsessive ambition of world domination is openly denied today but secretly plotted. . . . [T]he Mormon hierarchy, beginning with Joseph Smith himself, has always had worldwide and absolute *political power* as its goal.”<sup>63</sup> They even outlined a possible scenario, beginning with the ascension to

---

<sup>62</sup> Compare Peterson and Ricks, *Offenders for a Word*, 178–83. Decker has an idiosyncratic understanding of such matters. He seems to believe that the fact that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints sends out missionaries contradicts the declaration of its eleventh Article of Faith that it believes in religious freedom (p. 59). Of course, his apparent error may be related to his eccentric explanation of the purpose of Latter-day Saint proselyting: “That goal of establishing a theocratic rule over the United States and planet Earth is still an integral part of the Mormon faith and the underlying motivation factor in their desire to convert the world.” See Ed Decker and Dave Hunt, *The God Makers* (Eugene: Harvest House, 1984), 10.

<sup>63</sup> Decker and Hunt, *The God Makers*, 230, 241, 234–35, emphasis in the original.

power (perhaps via the assassination of his predecessor) of a Latter-day Saint president of the United States:

The new President would immediately begin to gather around him increasing numbers of zealous Temple Mormons in strategic places at the highest levels of government. A crisis similar to the one which Mormon prophecies "foretold" occurs, in which millions of Mormons with their year's supply of food, guns, and ammunition play a key role. . . . Under cover of the national and international crisis, the Mormon President of the United States acts boldly and decisively to assume dictatorial powers. With the help of The Brethren and Mormons everywhere, he appears to save America and becomes a national hero. At this time he is made Prophet and President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day [sic] Saints and the Mormon Kingdom of God, while still President of the United States. There is no provision in the Constitution to prevent this. With the government largely in the hands of increasing numbers of Mormon appointees at all levels throughout the United States, the Constitutional prohibition against the establishment of a state church would no longer be enforceable.<sup>64</sup>

If the Mormon Church should ever succeed in taking over the world, Mormonism in its most fanatical and bizarre practices will become the rule enforced unblinkingly upon everyone.<sup>65</sup>

One scarcely knows how to respond to this sort of thing, other than to say, firmly, that Decker's slanders are baseless and contemptible. <sup>66</sup> Latter-day Saints have always believed what the

---

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 241-42.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 234.

<sup>66</sup> One of Decker's particularly fascinating fellow-travellers, bearing the improbable name of Loftes Tryk, likewise contends that Latter-day Saints are plotting to overthrow the government of the United States and points, as irrefutable evidence, to the enthusiastic Mormon sponsorship of the infamous paramilitary organization called the Boy Scouts of America. (I am not making

Prophet Joseph Smith wrote many years ago in what has come to be called their eleventh Article of Faith, and have tried to live accordingly: "We claim the privilege of worshiping Almighty God according to the dictates of our own conscience, and allow all men the same privilege, let them worship how, where, or what they may." We do not seek to compel our members, much less others, to comply with the gospel. (In Germany, for instance, where the Church is officially recognized as a *Körperschaft des öffentlichen Rechts* and where the government would, therefore, willingly extract money for it from its members as part of the "church tax" or *Kirchensteuer*, it has declined to avail itself even of this tiny bit of perfectly legal compulsion.) Accordingly, it is difficult not to be reminded of what Jerald and Sandra Tanner, themselves dedicated anti-Mormons, said about Ed Decker and some of his sidekicks a few years ago:

While we are sorry to have to say this, it seems there are some who will accept any wild story or theory if it puts the Mormons in a bad light. They reason that since they already know that Mormonism is false, it is all right to use anything that has an adverse effect on the system. The question of whether an accusation is true or false appears to be only a secondary consideration.<sup>67</sup>

It is, in fact, Ed Decker himself and his associates whose commitment to religious liberty is questionable. Decker went to Israel in a vain attempt to block the construction there of Brigham

---

this up.) See Loftes Tryk, *The Best Kept Secrets in the Book of Mormon* (Redondo Beach: Jacob's Well Foundation, 1988), 131–50. I reviewed this remarkable specimen of anti-Mormon literature in *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 3 (1991): 231–60.

<sup>67</sup> Tanner and Tanner, *Serious Charges against the Tanners*, 47. Ed Decker has, reportedly, said almost precisely this himself. An acquaintance of mine once told me that when, many years ago, he confronted Decker about the way something he (my acquaintance) had said had been seriously distorted and then incorporated into the film *The God Makers*, Decker did not deny the misrepresentation. Instead, he replied that, when one is fighting the devil, any means are fair. (The fast-and-loose editing of the film version of *The God Makers II*, by the way, appears to demonstrate that Decker is indeed not overly scrupulous about his choice of means.)

Young University's Jerusalem Center for Near Eastern Studies; he showed his inflammatory film *The God Makers* to a subcommittee of the Israeli parliament, the Knesset, in an abortive bid to enlist the Israeli government in his campaign against the Latter-day Saints.<sup>68</sup> In the West African nation of Ghana, he helped to persuade the dictatorial government of Jerry Rawlins to suspend the activities of the Church in June 1989; one week before the official edict was issued, *The God Makers* was shown on Ghanaian national television. "That, I'm sure, cemented some attitudes," he remarked. As a consequence, all foreign missionaries of the Church were given one week to leave the country, Latter-day Saint buildings were locked up, and Latter-day Saint meetings were banned for nearly eighteen months. At the same time, Decker announced that a major effort was underway to accomplish the same results in other third-world countries, and he specifically mentioned nearby Nigeria.<sup>69</sup> Consider, too, a contemporary newspaper report from the 29 May 1983 "Capstone Conference" convened by leading anti-Mormons at Alta, Utah, where the late "Dr." Walter Martin (the founder of Hank Hanegraaff's Christian Research Institute and a prominent Decker supporter), gloated that "he had recently returned from Kenya, Africa, where he had . . . influenced the country's government to deny the application filed by the Mormon Church with the Registrar of Societies. This action has closed the country to organized missionary activity for some time, Martin said."<sup>70</sup> At the same conference, Decker himself boasted

---

<sup>68</sup> See Steven W. Baldrige and Marilyn M. Rona, *Grafting In: A History of the Latter-day Saints in the Holy Land* (Jerusalem: The Jerusalem Branch, 1989), 78–79; also "Leader of Anti-Mormon Group Admits He Helped Stir Jews' Furor over Center," *Salt Lake Tribune*, 10 August 1985; "Christian Groups Join in Protest of Mormon Center," *Denver Intermountain Jewish News*, 19 August 1985; compare Teddy Kollek, with Shulamith Eisner, *My Jerusalem* (New York: Summit Books, 1990), 78.

<sup>69</sup> See Mark Augustine, "Ghana: What Went Wrong? Politics, Economics and Anti-LDS Sparked Expulsion," *The Latter-day Sentinel*, 23 August 1989, A6; also Alexander B. Morrison, *The Dawning of a Brighter Day: The Church in Black Africa* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1990), 116–18.

<sup>70</sup> Lisa Barlow, "Anti-Mormons Organize at Alta," *7th East Press*, 10 June 1983, 1.

that by claiming the theology of Mormonism is not "true Christianity," he convinced government authorities in Chile that Mormonism is unconstitutional. . . .

Decker said because the country is a dictatorship and not a democracy, it has the power to implement this policy.

Decker met with government officials while visiting his son, who is presently serving a mission for the LDS Church in Chile. Decker said that, as a result of his meeting, the government will soon restrict the number of LDS missionaries from 1000 to 100.<sup>71</sup>

That Decker's prediction about missionary numbers proved false does not alter the fact that it is he, not the Mormons, who has sought to "criminalize soul-winning efforts." It is he, not the Latter-day Saints, who has resorted to the coercive power of dictatorial regimes in an endeavor to suppress people whose theology differs from his. And he would apparently like to do the same thing even in America. The conclusion of his notorious pseudodocumentary film *The God Makers* intimates that Mormonism would be legally punishable in a properly constituted state.<sup>72</sup>

Obviously, this is not merely a theoretical issue of the relationship between "church" and "state." But the implications of Decker's actions may go considerably beyond state oppression of Latter-day Saints. "The bombings of Mormon churches in Chile began in July of 1984," according to Dean Helland, an anti-Mormon evangelist with extensive experience there. "By 1990,

---

<sup>71</sup> Barlow, "Anti-Mormons Organize at Alta," 13. Note the touching evidence of Decker's fatherly concern in the story.

<sup>72</sup> Donald Alvin Eagle, an ordained Disciples of Christ minister and Arizona regional director of the National Conference of Christians and Jews, related his experience: "Since the issuance of our rather cautious, unemotional statement about *The Godmakers*, my office has received many communications. A typical letter from a 'missionary to the Mormons' states: 'I happen to care about the Mormons too much to allow them to go on in their deception. They need to be saved'; emphasis added. The language suggests religious paternalism at the least or spiritual dictatorship at the worst." See Donald Alvin Eagle, "One Community's Reaction to *The Godmakers*," *Dialogue* 18/2 (Summer 1985): 38.

over 200 Mormon chapels had been damaged by bombs.”<sup>73</sup> Intriguingly, Reverend Helland, who hosted Ed Decker on his visit to Chile, believes that the terrorist bombing campaign against Chilean Latter-day Saints “could have been sparked at least in part by some of the things which were exposed in Decker’s teachings.” Helland does not, of course, acknowledge that “Decker’s teachings” about Mormonism were grotesquely inaccurate, that what was supposedly “exposed” may in fact have been substantially invented, but he admits that Decker’s rhetoric against the Church may have been excessive, “emphasizing its more bizarre aspects.” Among other things, Decker evidently galvanized his audiences with incendiary allegations about the putatively conspiratorial character of the Church, “its involvement in the FBI, the CIA and international politics. This approach naturally enraged the Chilean citizens.”<sup>74</sup>

- In order to further its purported conspiracy, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints hides its real intentions behind a carefully polished image of traditional values. Thus, for instance, “Its missionaries have simply exchanged their old ‘sheep’s clothing’ for a newer style. They are still wolves” (p. 137). And, “The same tabernacle which echoed a hundred years ago to Brigham Young’s cries of ‘Kill the apostates!’ is now filled with cozy bromides about families and Jesus” (p. 136).

Innocent readers of Decker’s book will, of course, assume that the cry of “Kill the apostates!” was common in President Young’s sermons. But a computer search of thousands of pages of nineteenth-century Mormon speeches and other writings failed to find a single occurrence of the phrase “Kill the apostates!” In fact, when inquiry was made for the words “kill” and “apostates” in proximity to one another, what showed up over and over again was embittered apostates attempting to kill the Saints and

---

<sup>73</sup> Dean Maurice Helland, letter to Louis Midgley, dated 29 March 1993, cited in Louis Midgley, “Playing with Half a Decker: The Countercult Religious Tradition Confronts the Book of Mormon,” in *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 5 (1993): 161 n. 98.

<sup>74</sup> Dean Maurice Helland, “Meeting the Book of Mormon Challenge in Chile” (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1990), 2; cf. 3, 63. Reverend Helland’s work, reviewed by Louis Midgley in *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 5 (1993): 116–71, was written as a doctoral dissertation in the School of Theology and Missions at Oral Roberts University.

their leaders. (And, given indisputable historical facts such as the anti-Mormons' notorious Missouri "extermination order," the massacre of Latter-day Saints at Haun's Mill, the murder of Joseph and Hyrum Smith, and the enforced flight of the Church from Illinois to the Great Basin, it would appear that Decker's claim is, to put it mildly, untrue.)<sup>75</sup>

### Mormons as Bogus Ecumenists

"Mormons," says Ed Decker, "are . . . eager these days to become part of the ecumenical body of Christianity" (p. 134; cf. 231, 331, 341). Accordingly, Mormonism is in a "race to look more like general Christianity" (p. 135). "This work," Decker says of his *Handbook*, "is to help prevent that from happening" (p. 341).

As part of the Latter-day Saints' alleged effort to disguise the horrible realities of their faith, Decker reveals to his audience, "even the celebrated statue of the 'Restoration of the Aaronic Priesthood' has been moved to an out-of-the-way corner" of Temple Square (p. 135). But Decker's allegation is highly misleading. The statue in question has, it is true, been moved. It is now located near the busy new east entrance to Temple Square, through which thousands of people pass each week on their way to or from the theater in the Joseph Smith Memorial Building where the popular film *Legacy* is shown. This is hardly "an out-of-the-way corner."

### Miscellaneous Misrepresentations

- On page 170, Decker confuses Joseph F. Smith with his son, who is invariably known as Joseph Fielding Smith. On page 291, he makes Joseph Fielding Smith president of the Church earlier than he really was, evidently in order to give official status to one

---

<sup>75</sup> Decker's comments on the Prophet's assassination are intriguing. On page 367, he notes that "Joseph Smith was murdered by a mob in Carthage jail." On page 406, he declares that it was "the Lord" who "struck down Smith" (see John 16:2). On page 382, Decker implicitly laments that Joseph was not murdered earlier.



of Elder Smith's speculations and thus make it more useful for beating up on the Mormons.

- Decker points out that, at the time of the 1978 revelation on priesthood, the Church warned of the risks of interracial and intercultural marriage. He alludes specifically to an article that quotes several earlier comments from Spencer W. Kimball, who was president of the Church at the time of the revelation. In one comment, originally made to Indian students at Brigham Young University on 5 January 1965, Elder Kimball had said,

Now, the brethren feel that it is not the wisest thing to cross racial lines in dating and marrying. There is no condemnation. We have had some of our fine young people who have crossed the lines. We hope they will be very happy, but experience of the brethren through a hundred years has proved to us that marriage is a very difficult thing under any circumstances and the difficulty increases in interracial marriages.<sup>76</sup>

In another statement, given to a University devotional assembly on 7 September 1976, President Kimball "recommend[ed]" that people marry spouses "of the same racial background generally, and of somewhat the same economic and social and educational background."<sup>77</sup> These remarks neither called mixed marriages a sin nor threatened them with punishment. ("There is," said President Kimball, "no condemnation.") Clearly, these comments were of an advisory character; they were prudential rather than theological, doctrinal, or disciplinary. Nevertheless, Decker notes (as if it were relevant) that the New Testament never denounces mixed marriages as a sin nor threatens them with punishment, and then he announces that the "contrast" [!!] proves Mormonism unbiblical (pp. 291–93). (It seems, incidentally, that Decker has never read Ezra 9:2; 10:10, and Nehemiah 10:30; 13:25, which do condemn interracial marriage on religious grounds.)

- Hugh Nibley's *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Egyptian Endowment*, claims Decker, "does such a poor job in

---

<sup>76</sup> See "Interracial Marriage Discouraged," *Church News*, 17 June 1978, 4.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

trying to defend Joseph Smith's 'translation' that the church has been unwilling to endorse it" (p. 103). Decker does not inform his readers that the Church seldom if ever endorses books other than the scriptures themselves. Thus he leads them to the false assumption that Prof. Nibley's book (because of its supposedly low quality) has missed out on something that most Mormon books habitually receive. He attempts, thereby, to deliver himself from the obligation of dealing with Dr. Nibley's arguments.

- "Even devout Mormons tend to be obsessed with fringe occult practices such as astrology, New Age medicine and healing practices, and even sorcery" (p. 310), if you believe Decker. But does he have any evidence for this rather serious charge? If so, why didn't he offer it?

- Latter-day Saints, says Decker, "have a hard time accepting John's testimony" of Jesus in John 1:14-18 (pp. 252-53). However, he cites no evidence for this claim, and I have never (in years of Church experience at various levels on four continents) heard of any such difficulty.

- Decker claims that Mormons seek to escape "from any serious discussions with well-informed Christians" (p. 152). Where is his evidence for this charge? (Does he *know* any "well-informed Christians"?)

- "A fairly successful witnessing tool in speaking to a Mormon who has brought up the abominable creeds story is to read one of the standards, such as the Nicene or Apostles' Creed, and ask them to identify those portions that are filthy in the eyes of God. Even the boldest of LDS apologists will walk carefully around that one" (p. 153). Well, well. I don't know about any others, but Ed Decker can reach me through FARMS, at the address given on the back cover of the present *Review*. I would be happy to identify for him the influence of pagan Greek philosophy on the classical creeds.

- On page 351, Decker quotes a pamphlet published by the Church, "What the Mormons Think of Christ," as remarking that "Christians speak often of the blood of Christ and its cleansing power." "Note here," Decker comments, "how the LDS church tacitly admits that Christians are something other than Mormons." But this is misreading of the worst sort. If I say that "people often make mistakes," am I "tacitly admitting" that I am not one of

them? If I say that "humans have two legs," am I "tacitly admitting" that I am actually a horse?

### Falsifications of Mormon Theology

In his "Foreword" to *Decker's Complete Handbook on Mormonism*, Hank Hanegraaff offers trusting readers a list of "major Mormon theological travesties," including alleged Latter-day Saint denial of Christ's deity.<sup>78</sup> Hanegraaff's accusation is, of course, completely specious. Nonetheless, Ed Decker approaches Mormonism in the same inaccurate way. And he has demonstrably done so since first he took up his career as an anti-Mormon agitator. Consider, for example, the 1983 evaluation of Decker's film *The God Makers* given by Rev. Dr. Roger R. Keller, who served at the time as pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Mesa, Arizona:

I know of no other way to state my feelings about the film than to say that it was religious pornography—utterly without redeeming social value. As one associated for many years with the LDS church and as one who has read widely both in the basic documents and theologies of the church, I can assure any who care to hear, that any resemblance between *The God Makers* and Mormonism was purely accidental. The movie was a compilation of half-truths, innuendo and falsehoods, coupled with an incredible lack of appreciation for anything Mormon. It reeked of anger, hatred, and, at best—misunderstanding.<sup>79</sup>

Decker's own doctrinal views are extraordinarily provincial, if not solipsistic. They also suffer from grotesquely exaggerated self-confidence. Thus, at page 263, he effectively decrees that disagreement with his view of God is, *ipso facto*, disagreement with the Bible. But when he quotes Proverbs 14:12 as warning that "there is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end

---

<sup>78</sup> Hanegraaff, "Foreword," 6.

<sup>79</sup> Roger R. Keller, letter to the editor, *Mesa Tribune*, 13 March 1983. Incidentally, Dr. Keller has since joined The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

thereof are the ways of death" (p. 120), one yearns to know how he can be so certain (short of postbiblical revelation, which he denies) that this is a warning to the Latter-day Saints. It could just as plausibly be aimed at him.

Decker quotes Paul, writing in 1 Corinthians 15:3–4, who describes the Christian gospel as the good news "that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures" (pp. 222–23). Decker says that this is "a simple gospel—but certainly *not* the gospel as presented by the prophet Joseph Smith, his successors, nor [*sic*] his church" (p. 223, emphasis in the original). He is wrong. In fact, Joseph Smith described the restored gospel in terms obviously dependent on, precisely, 1 Corinthians 15:3–4: "The fundamental principles of our religion," said the Prophet, "are the testimony of the Apostles and Prophets, concerning Jesus Christ, that He died, was buried, and rose again the third day, and ascended into heaven; and all other things which pertain to our religion are only appendages to it."<sup>80</sup> "A simple gospel," one might conclude, "but not the post-Nicene Aristotelianized Neoplatonic gospel of Ed Decker and his associates, with its metaphysical Trinity, its Manichæan doctrine of original sin, and its insistence that God will never again be allowed to communicate his will to prophets."<sup>81</sup> Thus, Decker is constrained to caricature and distort Latter-day Saint beliefs in order to appall his readers, and to misrepresent the Bible and historical Christian theology in order to make them feel superior to the benighted Mormons. I offer a few examples of his technique:

### Decker and "the Mormon Jesus"

"The Jesus of biblical Christianity and the Jesus of Mormonism are," declares Decker, "quite obviously very different per-

---

<sup>80</sup> *DHC* 3:30.

<sup>81</sup> Decker speaks of "the simplicity of the true gospel" (p. 420), but his own religious beliefs are the end product of a tortured theological evolution that has been anything but simple. For an eye-opening recent description of this process written by a mainstream Christian scholar and published by a conservative Christian press, see Stuart G. Hall, *Doctrine and Practice in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991). (Can anyone label the doctrine of the Trinity "simple" and keep a straight face?)

sons" (p. 248). (In some instances, as on p. 333, he even speaks of "the 'Jesus' of Mormonism.") Certainly his most outrageous and misleading claim is that, in Mormonism, "there is no qualitative difference" (p. 56), "no essential difference between Jesus and Lucifer" (p. 274). How does he endeavor to establish his charge?

- Recent printings of the Book of Mormon have carried on their covers the explanatory subtitle "Another Testament of Jesus Christ." Ed Decker claims to think that, in this, he has finally caught the fiendishly clever Mormons with their masks off. "The word *another* on the *Book of Mormon* cover implies an additional testament," he says. "The dictionary defines *another* as 'different' or 'changed' " (p. 248). Well, yes, it does. But is that the word's only meaning? If I finish one glass of water and ask for another, am I really asking for something "different" or something "changed"? For root beer, perhaps, or for motor oil? Clearly not. The first entry under "another" in my *Oxford American Dictionary* is simply "additional, one more." Decker wants readers to swallow his allegations that the Book of Mormon is foreign to the Bible, and that the Jesus of the Nephites is alien to the Jesus of Palestine, but he clearly cannot rely on ordinary English usage to make his case.

- Part of Decker's argument for the proposition that the Jesus of Mormonism is distinct from the Jesus of the Bible is that, in the Book of Mormon (3 Nephi 8-9), the Savior's postresurrection appearance is accompanied by considerable death and destruction among the Nephites (see pp. 248-51). "This is some way for the Book of Mormon Jesus to celebrate the first Easter—by wiping out a couple of million people and then smothering the survivors in impossible darkness!" (p. 251).<sup>82</sup> But this is a rather remark-

---

<sup>82</sup> Decker's phrase "impossible darkness" refers to the "vapor of darkness" described in the Book of Mormon account which, as Decker himself accurately summarizes, "seemed to be a tangible thing which allowed no light at all" (p. 251). Decker finds this "mysterious"—and implies that it is, therefore, unbelievable. What is truly mysterious and unbelievable, however, is that he would presume to write on the subject without having done his homework. Hugh Nibley, *Since Cumorah*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 231-38, shows that the account of the great destruction given in 3 Nephi—specifically including the "vapor of darkness"—is remarkably plausible, and must have been written by an eyewitness. This discussion was first pub-

able argument, coming, as it does, from someone who believes that the Protestant trinitarian Jesus is the same God who ordered the Flood and the obliteration of the Canaanites, who believes that Jesus will destroy most of the earth's population in connection with his Second Coming, and that, though omnipotent and thus quite able to do otherwise, he will deliver the vast majority of all those who have ever lived upon the earth (including most if not all Latter-day Saints) over to eternal torture in the flames of hell. Is it possible that we see here, yet again, a self-serving double standard?

- Mormons, declares Decker, "do not consider Jesus to be the third Person of the Trinity" (p. 252). And he is quite right. Mormons consider Jesus to be the *second* person of the Godhead, which is composed of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.

- According to Decker, "the Jesus of Mormonism" is "less than God come in the flesh" (p. 253). His false accusation directly contradicts Mormon scriptures such as Book of Mormon Title Page; 1 Nephi 19:7–10; Mosiah 7:27; 13:28, 34; 15:1–3; 17:8; Alma 42:15; Ether 3:6, 8–9; Doctrine and Covenants 20:26; 93:4, 11; Moses 7:47, 54.

- In one of the most astonishing sections of the book, the entry entitled "Jesus: The Hollywood Version," Decker announces that the portrayal of Jesus in the controversial Universal Pictures film *The Last Temptation of Christ* "exactly matched the description of the Mormon Jesus" (p. 256).<sup>83</sup> This is, to put it mildly, a glaring untruth, and I cannot imagine that Decker doesn't know it. In 1988, when *The Last Temptation of Christ* appeared, Richard P. Lindsay, who was then serving as director of the Public Communications Department of the Church, issued a statement concerning it. As this statement not only refutes Decker's specific slander in this matter but casts doubt generally

---

lished in 1967. See also Russell Ball, "An Hypothesis concerning the Three Days of Darkness among the Nephites," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2/1 (Spring 1993): 107–19.

<sup>83</sup> Decker has the sheer brazen chutzpah to steal the phrase "religious pornography" to describe the film. That phrase had originally been applied to his own anti-Mormon pseudodocumentary *The God Makers* by Rev. Roger Keller, in the 13 March 1983 letter to the editor of the *Mesa Tribune*, partially quoted above. Not surprisingly, Decker fails to mention that interesting fact and gives no credit to Dr. Keller for the phrase.

upon Decker's accusations about Latter-day Saint views of Christ, I think it worth quoting the statement in its totality:

The film, "The Last Temptation of Christ," is not the story of Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God, who in Gethsemane and on Calvary took upon Himself the sins of the world, and rose from death with the promise of redemption for all.

In our view this film trivializes the message and mission of Jesus Christ. We abhor the unconscionable portrayal of Jesus Christ in intimate sexual scenes and as a voyeur. Men and women are left poorer by exposure to the stereotypes the movie portrays.

As our name implies, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints revere Jesus Christ as the Son of God, the Savior of the world. Having experienced the uplifting power of His spirit, we encourage all people to truly seek the Savior and the eternal truths He taught, and to shun those things that detract from the dignity and spirit of His divine mission.<sup>84</sup>

On pages 257-59, Decker tries to show that Latter-day Saints believe that the mortal Christ, like the Jesus of the movie, was an imperfect sinner. But even his own carefully chosen prooftexts fail to support him. Nonetheless, Decker tells his readers that the Mormon view of Jesus is "blasphemous," and that "the vilest portrayal of Jesus that Hollywood can create is in basic agreement with LDS theology" (p. 260).

### **"The God Makers," Yet Again**

The Latter-day Saint doctrine of eternal progression, Decker announces, is "blasphemy" (p. 302), "the lie from the very pit of hell" (p. 40; cf. 196, 302); it is "arrogantly stated" and "self-serving" (p. 270; cf. 302).

Decker seems unaware that doctrines of human deification or divinization, known in Greek as *theosis* and *theopoiesis*, have been

---

<sup>84</sup> "Church Issues Statement on Controversial New Movie," *Church News*, 20 August 1988.

widespread within Christianity from earliest times.<sup>85</sup> Even today, the language of human deification is characteristic of, among others, the large and ancient churches of Eastern Orthodoxy. Consider, for example, some of the comments on the subject (chosen from very, very many more) of the Archimandrite Christoforos Stavropoulos:

We live on earth in order to live in heaven, in order to be "divinized," in order to become one with God. This is the end and the fulfilment [*sic*] of our earthly destiny. . . . It is a topic that is deep and full of profound meaning. It has, in fact, been studied by the great Fathers of the Eastern Orthodox Church and their God-enlightened writings are full of the holy idea of the divinization or "Theosis" of human beings. . . . As human beings we each have this one, unique calling, to achieve Theosis. In other words, we are each destined to become a god; to be like God Himself, to be united with Him . . . to become just like God, a true god.<sup>86</sup>

Clearly, Decker expects Latter-day Saint talk about "becoming gods" to be offensive to his overwhelmingly Protestant audience. He counts on it. And he is probably right. But it should be recalled that fundamentalism is only a quite small and comparatively recent faction of Protestantism, which is itself merely a sixteenth-century schismatic form of Christianity that originated in the northwestern portion of a peninsula called Europe. It is sheer self-assertion, and only self-assertion, for people like Decker to claim that they alone are Christians, or that the vast variety of other doctrines held by the majority of the world's Christians are, in fact, not Christian, merely because those doctrines do not conform with sufficient exactitude to the views of late-twentieth-century Western Protestant fundamentalists.

---

<sup>85</sup> See the discussion, and especially the many further references, provided by Peterson and Ricks, *Offenders for a Word*, 75–92. Stendahl, *Final Account*, 30, points out that "the idea of deification or divinization" occurs in the epistle of Paul to the Romans.

<sup>86</sup> Christoforos Stavropoulos, *Partakers of Divine Nature*, trans. Rev. Stanley Harakas (Minneapolis: Light and Life, 1976), 11, 17–18.



## Decker and "Works-Righteousness"

"The Bible," Decker accurately observes, "is clear that Jesus did not just die for Adam's sin but for the individual sins of individual people" (p. 350). In contrast, according to Decker, Mormons deny that Jesus died for our sins (p. 56). In Mormonism, Jesus is "no more than a pointer, an example" (p. 253), and "without redemptive powers" (p. 255). "This 'Jesus' did not die on the cross for our sins, but only for Adam's transgression. Thus, he cannot really save any of us from our sins" (p. 349).<sup>87</sup> "In Mormonism," Decker has written elsewhere, "the blood of Christ atones for Adam's sin only, which brings resurrection to all. . . . Christ's blood doesn't atone for a single individual sin."<sup>88</sup> Every Mormon is, thus, necessarily committed to "the task of earning personal salvation, outside the gift of Christ's shed blood at Calvary" (p. 253; cf. 160, 316, 346). Consequently, Decker contends, Mormonism is "a legalistic system worse than that of the Pharisees" (p. 306; cf. 360).<sup>89</sup>

"The real tragedy," he insists, "is that the shed blood of Jesus has been removed as a covering from the Mormon people, replaced by their own works and purity as the reason and hope of

---

<sup>87</sup> On the other hand, Decker falsely alleges that "the Mormons claim that [Joseph Smith] died as a martyr, shed his blood for us, so that we, too, may become Gods" (p. 269).

<sup>88</sup> Dave Hunt and Ed Decker, *Unmasking Mormonism* (Eugene: Harvest House, 1984), 34. In the pamphlet entitled *The Law of Eternal Progression* (Issaquah, WA: Saints Alive in Jesus, n.d.), Decker cites James E. Talmage's *The Articles of Faith*, 68–70, as teaching this alleged Mormon doctrine. He names no specific edition. In my personal copies of the book (printed in 1968, 1969, and 1972), those pages, though relevant to the general issue and obviously the ones to which Decker refers, do not teach what he claims they teach. On the other hand, pages 85–91 directly contradict Decker's assertion.

<sup>89</sup> Yet Decker portrays Latter-day Saints as unexpectedly relaxed about all this, since, he contends, they don't really take sin very seriously and would not be particularly upset if they reach only the terrestrial kingdom instead of the celestial (p. 399). This is not true, and I am quite confident that Decker knows it. His fellow anti-Mormon, Rev. Mark Cares, who unlike Decker has never been a Latter-day Saint, knows that it is false. See his *Speaking the Truth in Love to Mormons* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing, 1993), 56.

their resurrection and salvation" (p. 130; cf. 180, 199).<sup>90</sup> Decker laments the supposed "tragedy" that "Mormons must stand before God's throne . . . and lift up their own frail works as their only offering of righteousness before a holy God" (p. 131).

• But is any of this true? No. "When Mormons claim to be saved," asserts Decker, "it only means that they have gained . . . general resurrection. Beyond this, everything in the LDS 'plan of salvation' is by works."<sup>91</sup> In support of this false claim on page 348, Decker refers his readers to *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* 3:1257—which says nothing of the kind. Indeed, quite to the contrary, Alma P. Burton's article on "Salvation" describes it as "the greatest gift of God (cf. D&C 6:13)" and defines it as "redemption from the bondage of sin and death, through the atonement of Jesus Christ."<sup>92</sup> In fact, even the quotation from Bruce McConkie's *Mormon Doctrine* supplied by Decker (also on p. 348) contradicts him, when it depicts "conditional or individual salvation" as "that which comes by grace coupled with gospel obedience."

The article in the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* on the "Atonement of Jesus Christ," written by Jeffrey R. Holland (now a member of the Council of the Twelve), makes the Latter-day Saint position on this subject so clear that even Ed Decker, were he an honest and serious man, would have to acknowledge it. Consider simply the first paragraph of the article:

The atonement of Jesus Christ is the foreordained  
but voluntary act of the Only Begotten Son of God. He

---

<sup>90</sup> Please note that, in this passage, Decker alleges that Latter-day Saints think even their resurrection to be earned by their good works; elsewhere (as at p. 348) he declares that, in Mormon belief, resurrection and only resurrection comes to us by the grace of Christ.

<sup>91</sup> It would appear that, on this matter, Hank Hanegraaff has been a faithful student of Decker's distortions. In an undated "CRI Perspective," entitled "Mormonism and Salvation" and distributed by his Christian Research Institute, Hanegraaff falsely alleges that "When Mormons talk about salvation by grace, they're referring to what they themselves call 'general salvation.' By this, Mormons mean that everybody is going to be resurrected, after which they will be judged according to their works. In other words, everybody gets an entrance pass to God's courtroom, but once inside, they're on their own! This, of course, adds up to nothing more than salvation by works."

<sup>92</sup> Alma P. Burton, "Salvation," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 3:1256.

offered his life, including his innocent body, blood, and spiritual anguish as a redeeming ransom (1) for the effect of the fall of Adam upon all mankind and (2) for the personal sins of all who repent, from Adam to the end of the world. Latter-day Saints believe this is the central fact, the crucial foundation, the chief doctrine, and the greatest expression of divine love in the plan of salvation. The Prophet Joseph Smith declared that all "things which pertain to our religion are only appendages" to the atonement of Christ (*TPJS*, p. 121).<sup>93</sup>

I can easily imagine Decker replying that this is merely a recent attempt by Mormons to pose as "real Christians." But such a rejoinder fails. From the beginning, and in all of their scriptures, Latter-day Saints have consistently taught the same doctrine. "Therefore," says Jesus Christ in Doctrine and Covenants 19:15–16,

I command you to repent—repent, lest I smite you by the rod of my mouth, and by my wrath, and by my anger, and your sufferings be sore—how sore you know not, how exquisite you know not, yea, how hard to bear you know not. For behold, I, God, have suffered these things for all, that they might not suffer if they would repent; but if they would not repent they must suffer even as I.<sup>94</sup>

The fact that Jesus died for our sins (in the plural), and not merely for Adam's singular sin, is amply attested in Latter-day Saint scripture.<sup>95</sup> At Mosiah 14:5, for instance, the Nephite prophet Abinadi cites Isaiah's description of the Messiah as

---

<sup>93</sup> Jeffrey R. Holland, "Atonement of Jesus Christ," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 1:82–83.

<sup>94</sup> "It is obvious," Decker asserts, "that the biblical penalty for sin has been removed from Mormon theology" (p. 163). Obvious to whom?

<sup>95</sup> See, besides those cited here, such passages as 1 Nephi 11:33; Mosiah 3:11–12; Alma 24:13; 34:8; 3 Nephi 11:14; Doctrine and Covenants 29:1. There is no point in multiplying references on this issue; similar declarations from Latter-day Saint prophets and apostles must surely number in the thousands. Ed Decker has no excuse for his false statements on this matter.

“wounded for our transgressions” and “bruised for our iniquities,” as well as that ancient prophet’s declaration that “with his stripes we are healed.” “And since man had fallen,” says the Nephite teacher Aaron, “he could not merit anything of himself; but the sufferings and death of Christ atone for their sins, through faith and repentance” (Alma 22:14).

• “Mormons,” Decker pretends, “deny the Bible’s teaching that ‘the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin’ (1 John 1:7)” (p. 351; cf. 388). “Mormons are not Christians,” he declares, “and spurn—even mock—the cleansing power of the blood of Jesus Christ” (p. 311).

Wisely, though, he neglects to supply any examples of such supposed mockery. But there are plenty of counterexamples, of which a few should suffice. As the prophet Helaman said to his sons Nephi and Lehi, “O remember, remember, my sons . . . that there is no other way nor means whereby man can be saved, only through the atoning blood of Jesus Christ” (Helaman 5:9).<sup>96</sup> “O then ye unbelieving,” cried the prophet Moroni, “turn ye unto the Lord; cry mightily unto the Father in the name of Jesus, that perhaps ye may be found spotless, pure, fair, and white, having been cleansed by the blood of the Lamb, at that great and last day” (Mormon 9:6). And the second-to-last verse of the Book of Mormon promises the readers of that volume that, “if ye by the grace of God are perfect in Christ, and deny not his power, then are ye sanctified in Christ by the grace of God, through the shedding of the blood of Christ, which is in the covenant of the Father unto the remission of your sins, that ye become holy, without spot” (Moroni 10:33).

• “Mormons believe eternal life must be earned,” Decker asserts, “and thus they can never be assured of its possession” (p. 348). Accordingly, he implies, their position contrasts sharply with that of true, biblical Christianity.

Decker’s assertion falls into two parts, both highly misleading. With regard to the first, that “Mormons believe eternal life must be earned,” a statement made at a general conference of the Church by Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the Quorum of the Twelve

---

<sup>96</sup> Compare Doctrine and Covenants 38:4; 45:3–5; 76:69.

Apostles and published in the official monthly magazine of the Church, seems relevant:

Man unquestionably has impressive powers and can bring to pass great things by tireless efforts and indomitable will. But after all our obedience and good works, we cannot be saved from the effect of our sins without the grace extended by the atonement of Jesus Christ. . . .

. . . *Man cannot earn his own salvation.*<sup>97</sup>

Is that clear enough? And, once again, there can be no question of this being simply a new doctrinal pose, designed to make Latter-day Saints look more like Protestants. Consider what Orson Pratt, one of the original members of the Quorum of the Twelve, had to say back in 1848:

Man, having once become guilty, could not atone for his own sins, and escape the punishment of the law, though he should ever afterwards strictly keep the law; for, "*By the works of the law,*" or, by obedience to the law, "NO FLESH CAN BE JUSTIFIED." If a sinner, after having once transgressed the law, could purchase forgiveness by ever afterwards keeping the law, then there would have been no need of the atonement made by Christ. If the demands of justice could have been satisfied, and pardon granted, through repentance and good works, then the sufferings and death of Christ would have been entirely unnecessary. But if Christ had not suffered on our behalf, our faith, repentance, baptisms, and every other work, would have been utterly useless and in vain. Works, independently of Christ, would not atone even for the least sin.<sup>98</sup>

---

<sup>97</sup> Dallin H. Oaks, "What Think Ye of Christ," *Ensign* 18 (November 1988): 67, emphasis added; see also Stephen E. Robinson, *Believing Christ: The Parable of the Bicycle and Other Good News* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992).

<sup>98</sup> Orson Pratt, *The Kingdom of God, Part II* (Liverpool: James, 1848), 3–4, italics and capitalization in the original.

In the second part of Decker's statement, he alleges that Latter-day Saints are out of harmony with Christianity because they can supposedly never, in this life, have perfect assurance of their salvation. Much could be said in reply to this claim, but I shall allow a spokesman for the world's roughly 150 million Eastern Orthodox Christians to respond. First, he quotes a typical fundamentalist Protestant assertion:

"I thank God for the blessed doctrine of assurance. I know that I am saved and am going to heaven."

You may thank God for such a doctrine, but the fact remains that it is absolutely unscriptural. Scripture clearly teaches that it is possible for a believer to fall away through sin or unbelief and forfeit his salvation. St. Paul warns: "Let him who thinks he stands take care lest he fall" (I Cor. 10:12). He uses the example of the Israelites who passed through the Red Sea with Moses, and yet later fell away and were punished, as a warning to Christians. The Book of Hebrews uses the same example and warns, "Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any one of you an evil heart of unbelief, departing from the living God" (Heb. 3:12). Our eternal salvation depends on our perseverance in Christ: "For we are made partakers in Christ, if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end" (Heb. 3:14).

St. Paul did not consider himself to have attained "eternal security" but considered it necessary to keep pressing for the goal of the resurrection (cf. Phil. 3:9-14). He disciplined his body so that after preaching to others, he might not be cast away himself (cf. I Cor. 9:27). Christian salvation does not depend on just one instance of faith; it demands a daily walk of repentance and continuing trust in Christ. Otherwise it will be for us as it was for those whom Peter addressed: "For if after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, they are again entangled therein, and overcome, the latter end is worse with them than the beginning. For it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than, after they have

known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered unto them" (II Pet. 2:20–1). Clearly, then, it is possible to know Christ and then fall away. If this is so, how can we know "I am saved"? It is possible that any one of us might fall away. The only insurance against it is continual, daily trust in Christ and struggle against sin. Let us remember the words of Jesus: "Not every one who says to me Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he that does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 7:21). We must, as Peter says, "strive to make our calling and election sure" (II Pet. 1:10).<sup>99</sup>

### Decker's Demonization of the Temple

On 5 October 1884, George Q. Cannon, counselor to President John Taylor, explained to his conference audience that

Every temple that we build excites additional hatred, increases the volume of opposition, the volume of hostility and the threatenings of the wicked. Every temple that we have thus far completed—and every temple of which we lay the foundation—has been another testimony in favor of God and has brought strength to the people of God in enlisting the hosts in the eternal world upon our side; but at the same time there has been stirred up, from the very depths of hell, all the damned.

Satan and his legions unite with their agents upon the earth in an endeavor to destroy this work and to do everything in their power to obliterate it from the face of the earth; hell is enraged at the work we are doing; hell is stirred up at that which we are accomplishing. Satan sees that which he dreads, . . . and seeing this he is determined to exert every power, every influence that

---

<sup>99</sup> Fr. Paul O'Callaghan, *An Eastern Orthodox Response to Evangelical Claims* (Minneapolis: Light and Life, 1984), 25–26.

he can muster for the purpose of preventing the spread and growth of this work.<sup>100</sup>

President Brigham Young agreed. Encouraging his listeners to continue in their efforts to build the Salt Lake Temple, he noted that "Some say, 'I do not like to do it, for we never began to build a Temple without the bells of hell beginning to ring.' " Well, he replied, "I want to hear them ring again."<sup>101</sup>

It is, therefore, hardly surprising that Ed Decker and his collaborators have been highly visible distractions at virtually every temple open house and dedication in recent memory.<sup>102</sup> Nor is it surprising that *Decker's Complete Handbook* devotes many of its pages to assaulting Latter-day Saint temple worship.<sup>103</sup> Decker has even created a new and exotic breed of religionist, the "temple Mormon."<sup>104</sup> Many people will no doubt be surprised to learn that they belong to "a secret circle of Mormon elite called 'Temple Mormons.'" <sup>105</sup> In my Church experience on four continents, I have never heard that phrase used by Latter-day Saints. But I suppose it serves his intent to create distance, to foster alienation, and to label Mormons as "the other."<sup>106</sup> Let's look briefly at some of the other gambits he uses to achieve his end:

- "The pagan, fertility connotations of the LDS temple rites are," allows Decker, "well-concealed" (p. 177). No kidding! (They are nonexistent.)

<sup>100</sup> *JD* 25:326.

<sup>101</sup> *JD* 8:355.

<sup>102</sup> His fellow anti-Mormons Jerald and Sandra Tanner sharply criticize a few of Decker's more extreme assaults on the temple in their books *The Lucifer-God Doctrine [A]* and *The Lucifer-God Doctrine [B]*.

<sup>103</sup> I will not take Decker's bait and join him in public discussion of temple ceremonies that I hold sacred. However, I can categorically state that at least two of his disclosures about contemporary Latter-day Saint temple worship are simply, factually, untrue. He should, perhaps, be wary of depending for his information upon people who admittedly violate their own solemn promises.

<sup>104</sup> See, for example, pages 9, 53, 90, 99, 148, 180, 195, 198, 211, 232, 273, 275, 298-99, 306, 309, 346, 361, 411-12.

<sup>105</sup> Hunt and Decker, *Unmasking Mormonism*, 31.

<sup>106</sup> As does Hank Hanegraaff's cryptic and somewhat frightening remark, in his "Foreword," that Latter-day Saint temple rituals are "shrouded" in "ferocious secrecy" (p. 7).



- Decker cites as a strong parallel to pagan rites the fact that, in Latter-day Saint temples, worshipers remove “profane (worldly) clothing” and receive a “ceremonial washing and anointing” (p. 178). It is true that Latter-day Saint worshipers do just this, and their actions find remarkable parallel not only among ancient pagans but in ancient Christian practice.<sup>107</sup> Why does Decker’s brand of Christianity not do the same?

- “Mormon people continue to trust more in their temple than they do in the true and living God, Jesus Christ” (p. 185). But this is nonsense. It is rather like saying that someone trusts more in the scriptures than in God.

- Decker represents Mormons as believing, because of their work for the dead in the temples, that everybody gets a second chance after death (p. 215). But this is, of course, contrary to the teaching of both the Bible and the Book of Mormon (e.g., Alma 34:33–35). The trouble is that it is likewise contrary to the authentic teachings of the Latter-day Saints. In Mormon theology, everybody gets a fair chance to hear the gospel, and to accept it or reject it. Those who do not get this opportunity while in mortal life will receive it in the life to come. There is no “second chance.” (In fundamentalist Protestantism, by contrast, as I have often heard and seen it explained, people who fail to accept Jesus as their savior simply go to Hell and fry there for eternity. This includes those, like medieval Chinese peasants and ancient Babylonians and many modern tribesmen, who never accepted the gospel for the simple reason that they never once heard it mentioned.)

- “It is . . . important to note,” says Decker, “that no Christian temples are ever mentioned in the New Testament (i.e., temples built especially by Christians for rituals as part of the worship of God)” (p. 394). But, of course, it is also important to note (in order to understand how properly to evaluate Decker’s argument) that there is extraordinarily little evidence for Christian buildings

---

<sup>107</sup> See, for instance, St. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogical Catechesis* II, 2–3. This document is readily available in Frank L. Cross, ed., *St. Cyril of Jerusalem’s Lectures on the Christian Sacraments* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary, 1977), 59–60 (Greek text on p. 18).

of any kind until after the time of Constantine in the fourth century A.D.<sup>108</sup>

### Decker's Luciferian Obsession

- “Many Mormons do not know precisely what to make of Lucifer” (p. 276), says Decker, attempting to impose on them a perplexity that, I am quite confident, even he does not feel. He rightly points out that Doctrine and Covenants 93 speaks about Jesus. But then, noting that 93:25 is actually talking about Satan, he preposterously claims that Mormons confuse the Savior with Lucifer (pp. 39–40; cf. 36). It is just as if someone were to observe that Matthew 4 is about Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness and then, noting that *Satan* is also mentioned several times in the chapter, were to contend that early Christians confused Jesus with the devil. Is this serious writing?

- Hank Hanegraaff sounds a popular contemporary anti-Mormon theme when he asserts in his “Foreword” to the *Handbook* that “Christ, according to Mormon theology, has the dubious distinction of being Lucifer’s spirit-brother.”<sup>109</sup> But, as any serious student of Latter-day Saint doctrine would have known, this is no distinction at all. Mormons believe that *all* of the spirits born to the Father are brothers and sisters, including every human being who has ever lived and every angel, whether good or bad.

Decker naturally professes to be highly indignant at this: “To say that Lucifer was a son of God in the same manner as is Jesus is once more only the prattling of arrogant liars who instruct their followers in their own ignorance of Scripture” (p. 276). Of course, Mormons do not say that Jesus is the Son of God in exactly and only the sense in which Lucifer is. Mormon scripture is replete with descriptions of Jesus as the “Only Begotten Son of God in the flesh.” But one has only to glance over such passages as Job 1:6 and 2:1, where Satan is numbered among the “sons of

---

<sup>108</sup> See Graydon F. Snyder, *Ante Pacem: Archaeological Evidence of Church Life before Constantine* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1985), 67. Hugh Nibley offers an interesting explanation for this fact in his essay on “The Passing of the Primitive Church,” in Hugh Nibley, *Mormonism and Early Christianity* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1987), 168–208.

<sup>109</sup> Hanegraaff, “Foreword,” 6.

God,” to realize that he can very easily be reckoned, biblically, to be, in some sense at least, the brother of Jesus.

To charge Mormons accusingly with the belief that “Christ is the spirit brother of Lucifer,” is an attempt to shock Evangelicals who don’t know what the Bible actually teaches. It is a verbal form of “yellow journalism,” where a truth is intentionally and repeatedly phrased so that recipients will automatically reject it rather than investigate and accept it. By intent Evangelicals who use this phrase do not explain the Latter-day Saint teaching on the subject, nor examine its scriptural basis—they only assert that Mormons believe in a “different Jesus” because the Mormon Jesus is the “spirit brother of Lucifer.”<sup>110</sup>

### Miscellaneous Theological Mistakes

- Ed Decker is a master of the art of war against straw men. For example, based upon his own misreading of the text, Decker mocks Ether 9:28–34 as “the Ballad of the Cowboy Serpents” (pp. 363–64). He loves to draw highly questionable implications from Latter-day Saint beliefs and then to attribute his own inferences to the Mormons. He sets the limits of what can be changed in Mormonism and what cannot. He forces his own narrow fundamentalism on Mormons and then condemns them when they do not behave the way he demands that they should (as at pp. 340, 389, 396).<sup>111</sup> On page 374, he finds “much confusion” in Mormon thinking about basic issues—but the “confusion” seems, rather, to be his. Decker is fond of placing in Mormon mouths doctrines that they would never accept, and routinely takes past speculation as official doctrine in order to do so (as at p. 290). For example, he announces to his readers that, “By LDS

---

<sup>110</sup> Richard R. Hopkins, *Biblical Mormonism: Responding to Evangelical Criticism of LDS Theology* (Bountiful: Horizon, 1994), 103.

<sup>111</sup> On page 396, he invites his readers to “imagine the intense shock” felt by devout Latter-day Saints when confronted with supposedly disturbing changes in their supposedly immutable doctrine and practices. He offers no evidence whatever that any informed Mormon ever reacted in such a way.

standards, [the Holy Ghost] really can't be any kind of god since he doesn't have a physical body, but is only a spirit. This Holy Ghost cannot really regenerate or sanctify us, neither is he omniscient or omnipresent" (p. 56). Why does he fail to quote any Latter-day Saints saying these things? Wouldn't his case be stronger if he did? But, of course, he can't, since Latter-day Saints don't believe any such thing.

- "Mormons . . . believe," alleges Decker, in an evident attempt to make them look like sorcerers, "that they can command angels to come and minister unto them. They believe this is not only their privilege (through the power of the priesthood), but it is even a litmus test for the truth of the LDS gospel." He then proceeds to cite, as his sole support for this accusation, a statement from Bruce R. McConkie that says nothing of the kind (p. 284).

- Decker tells his readers that "the LDS god" resides upon a planet near a sun or star named "Kolob" (p. 263; cf. 274). But Latter-day Saint scripture seems to know nothing about any such planet. Indeed, Decker himself forgets it on page 268 when, while demeaning Latter-day Saint beliefs by the use of science fiction language, he represents "the LDS god" as journeying to earth "from the star base Kolob" itself.<sup>112</sup> And how, unless he himself is in orbit out there to watch, can Decker possibly know that "the LDS god rarely leaves his planet" (p. 263)?

- On page 327, Decker announces that the Latter-day Saint notion of self-existent matter is philosophically incoherent. He would be wise, though, to avoid philosophy, since he manifestly knows little about it.<sup>113</sup> The eminent Nobel laureate British philosopher and logician Bertrand Russell certainly would not have agreed with Decker:

If everything must have a cause, then God must have a cause. If there can be anything without a cause, it may just as well be the world as God, so that there cannot be any validity in that argument. It is exactly of the same

---

<sup>112</sup> On page 414, one Mormon teaching is described as "almost-science-fiction." On page 299, he shifts literary genres and says that certain Mormon practices are "worthy of a Tom Clancy novel."

<sup>113</sup> On pages 364-65, Decker unwittingly reveals that he has no very secure idea what a syllogism is.

nature as the Hindu's view, that the world rested upon an elephant and the elephant rested upon a tortoise; and when they said, "How about the tortoise?" the Indian said, "Suppose we change the subject." The argument is really no better than that. There is no reason why the world could not have come into being without a cause; nor, on the other hand, is there any reason why it should not have always existed. There is no reason to suppose that the world had a beginning at all. The idea that things must have a beginning is really due to the poverty of our imagination.<sup>114</sup>

- "Mormons will," says Decker, "cite 1 Corinthians 15:29 as their sole scriptural warrant for all their effort [in performing baptisms for the dead]" (p. 68). Not so. The Latter-day Saint practice of performing vicarious baptisms rests on modern revelation from God. Paul's reference to baptism for the dead is merely a useful bit of evidence that Joseph Smith has restored something once known to ancient Christians but forgotten by most of their theological heirs. Unlike fundamentalist Protestants, we do not utterly depend on ancient documents from dead prophets for our faith.

- Mormons are "polytheists" (p. 236), according to Decker. But Decker's own explanation of the Trinity (pp. 405–10) would abundantly justify the suspicion held, for example, by many Muslims that mainstream Christianity itself is polytheistic (not to mention logically incoherent).

- Decker takes a certain perverse satisfaction—or professes to, anyway—in the thought that some Latter-day Saints may regard him as a "son of perdition" (pp. 51, 379). He furthermore claims that Latter-day Saints believe that all who were once "devout temple Mormons" and then, having lost their testimonies for one reason or another, have become fundamentalist Protestants, are "sons of perdition" (pp. 232, 412). But he is wrong. He himself quotes

---

<sup>114</sup> Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian, and Other Essays on Religion and Related Subjects*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), 6–7. One need not agree with Lord Russell on this or other points. (I rarely agree with him.) I cite him to show that Decker's confident philosophical judgment is not at all beyond dispute.

Bruce R. McConkie as defining “sons of perdition” as “those in this life who gain a perfect knowledge of the divinity of the gospel cause, a knowledge that comes only by revelation from the Holy Ghost” (p. 378). “To commit this unpardonable crime,” says Elder McConkie in another passage quoted by Decker: “a man *must receive the gospel, [and] gain from the Holy Ghost by revelation the absolute knowledge of the divinity of Christ*” (p. 411, emphasis in the original). Probably very few apostate Mormons qualify under this standard. Ed Decker almost certainly does not. His *Handbook* is incontestable evidence that he knows and understands very little about the restored gospel.

Indeed, in reading Decker’s pretensions to the “elite” status of “son of perdition,” I am reminded of an old poem:

Once in a saintly passion  
 I cried with desperate grief,  
 “O Lord, my heart is black with guile,  
 Of sinners I am chief.”  
 Then stooped my guardian angel  
 And whispered from behind,  
 “Vanity, my little man,  
 You’re nothing of the kind.”<sup>115</sup>

In order to widen the supposed chasm between Christianity and the beliefs of the Latter-day Saints, Decker alleges that, in Mormonism, the “unpardonable sin” is to accept Jesus and be born again (p. 412). This is flatly not true. Decker himself quotes Bruce R. McConkie (on p. 411) as saying that someone who commits the “unpardonable sin” effectively “commit[s] murder by assenting unto the Lord’s death, that is, having a perfect knowledge of the truth he comes out in open rebellion and places himself in a position wherein he would have crucified Christ knowing perfectly the while that he was the Son of God. Christ is thus crucified afresh and put to open shame.” And, on page 412, he quotes Joseph Smith, who says that, in order to commit the

---

<sup>115</sup> James Thomson, “Once in a Saintly Passion” (1883). The poem is available (no doubt among many other places) in John Wilson Bowyer and John Lee Brooks, eds., *The Victorian Age: Prose, Poetry, and Drama*, 2nd ed. (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1954), 613. I am grateful to my colleague Prof. Richard H. Cracroft for locating this half-remembered item from my youth.

“unpardonable sin,” a man “has got to say that the sun does not shine while he sees it; he has got to deny Jesus Christ when the heavens have been opened unto him.” Does any of this sound like a description of accepting Jesus and being born again?

### Mischaracterizations of Mormon Scripture

Ed Decker lacks a deep or extensive knowledge of Latter-day Saint scripture. Consider this instance: “There is an old Mormon adage which I remember from my years in the church that goes something like this: ‘Adam fell that men might be, and men are that they might have joy’ ” (p. 31). Does he really not know that this is not merely a venerable proverb, an old “adage,” but a direct quotation of 2 Nephi 2:25, one of the most famous and beloved verses in the entire Mormon canon?

But, once again, one can only wish that Decker’s errors were generally so harmless. His abuse of Latter-day Saint canonical texts betrays itself at every point. I offer only a few examples.

### Changes in Mormon Scripture

- Seeking to portray the Church as constantly in flux and unstable, Decker tells his readers that, though the so-called “Lectures on Faith” have long since been removed from the Doctrine and Covenants, they once “were canonized as scripture” (pp. 168–69). But, as an introductory statement in the 1921 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants correctly pointed out, “they were never presented to nor accepted by the Church as being otherwise than theological lectures or lessons.”<sup>116</sup>

- On page 109, Decker points to the changes that have been made in the Book of Mormon text since its first edition, and finds them fatal to “the contention by *Joseph Smith himself* . . . that the golden plates were supposedly translated *letter-by-letter* ‘by the power of God’ ” (emphasis in the original).<sup>117</sup> He cites as his source for this claim *Documentary History of the Church* 1:54–55,

---

<sup>116</sup> Cited by Larry E. Dahl, “Lectures on Faith,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 2:819.

<sup>117</sup> The changes in the text of the Book of Mormon also irritate Hank Hanegraaff; see his “Foreword,” 6.

which does, in fact, contain the phrase “by the power of God” but makes absolutely no mention of any supposedly mechanical “letter-by-letter” translation process. Decker has apparently invented *that* as a weapon against Mormon claims.<sup>118</sup>

• The changes in the Book of Mormon text that Decker cites—and he has apparently selected his very best—are a remarkably poor lot. Obvious typographical errors like the omission of a “not” in the 1830 version of 2 Nephi 12:9 (p. 110), and manifest dictation mistakes like “wrecked” for “racked” (pp. 111–12) and “arrest” for “wrest” (p. 112), hardly make the case he claims. And there is scarcely a Latter-day Saint scholar anywhere who would deny that Joseph Smith was a poorly educated boy of the early nineteenth century. So what is the point of bringing up the 1830 edition’s use of “arriven” for “arrived” (p. 112)?

• Decker correctly notes the fact that Alma 32:30 is much longer in modern editions of the Book of Mormon than it was in the original 1830 edition (p. 111). But he is irresponsible when he encourages his readers to conclude that the change is evidence of fraud. It is obvious, rather, that the history of the verse is a clear case of the common scribal error known as *homeoteleuton* (or, alternatively, *homeoarcton*), long familiar to students of the New Testament. What happens is simply that the scribe’s eye skips from one word or phrase (in this instance, “beginneth to grow”) to another, identical one occurring further along, and the scribe thereupon inadvertently omits the intervening material.<sup>119</sup>

• On pages 112–13, Decker mocks Alma 46:19, which, in modern editions, describes captain Moroni as having gone forth “among the people, waving the rent part of his garment in the air.” Correctly, Decker points out that the 1830 edition had him merely “waving the rent of his garment,” which is certainly

---

<sup>118</sup> Decker also alludes to the changes made in the text of the Doctrine and Covenants (p. 167). “How,” demands Decker on page 176, “can you edit or add to a revelation supposedly from the Lord?” Well, if you have the Lord’s authority to do so, there seems to be no problem at all. Decker simply asserts that the Prophet had no such authority. However, nobody is obliged to accept his assertion.

<sup>119</sup> See *Book of Mormon Critical Text: A Tool for Scholarly Reference* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1986), 2:649.



strange English.<sup>120</sup> (Incomprehensibly, though, Decker claims that it “reflects an error in logic.”) But Decker seems not to realize that the verse as rendered in the 1830 edition represents perfectly acceptable Hebrew usage—which, since the Book of Mormon claims to have been written originally by ancient Hebrews, is very interesting indeed. “Thus, the ‘error’ that [Decker sees] as evidence of fraud [is] really a Hebraism that [is] evidence for the Book of Mormon.”<sup>121</sup> This information has been available for several years.

• Ironically, *Decker’s Complete Handbook* itself suffers from a distressing number of typographical errors and other infelicities. We read, for instance, of the Christian apologist “Aristedes” (p. 45, for “Aristides”) and of the ancient philosopher “Celsus the Epicurian” (p. 46, meaning “Epicurean”), and learn that, “for a Mormon, to be labeled an apostate is perhaps the worse [*sic*] curse that could be put upon a living person” (p. 50). And “Davis Bitton” I know, but who is the Latter-day Saint scholar “David Britton,” mentioned on page 372? Furthermore, Decker’s impressive Greek phrase *tou nomon* (supposedly cited from Matthew 5:18 at pp. 75, 77–78) is grammatically impossible (and does not actually occur in Matthew 5:18, or anywhere else in the New Testament).<sup>122</sup> Most intriguingly, when he quotes Doctrine

---

<sup>120</sup> Some adjectives in English, though, are commonly used as if they were themselves nouns or substantives, or are commonly taken to imply nouns. We routinely speak, for example, of “the poor,” “the wealthy,” and “the wounded,” referring to poor, wealthy, and wounded *people*.

<sup>121</sup> John A. Tvedtnes, “The Hebrew Background of the Book of Mormon,” in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1991), 78. The same is also true in Arabic, a language closely related to Hebrew. See, for instance, Michael A. Sells, trans., *Desert Tracings: Six Classic Arabian Odes by ‘Alqama, Shānfarā, Labīd, ‘Antara, Al-A‘sha, and Dhu al-Rūmma* (Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1989), 5 (with some related examples from ancient Arabian poetry on pages 11, 15, 31–35, 37–39, 45, 47, 50, 68, 75–76).

<sup>122</sup> I don’t know if others will be as bothered as I was by the fact that Decker almost always refers to Bruce R. McConkie’s *Mormon Doctrine* as, merely, “*Doctrine*” (see, for instance, p. 19). And when, referring to Moses 6:53–57, Decker denounces it as “a tortured use of the English language to say that ‘conceived in sin’ means that ‘sin conceiveth in their hearts’ ” (p. 146), he is right. But since it is Decker himself who makes that equation, and not the book of Moses, there is little doubt who is doing the torturing.

and Covenants 128:20 on page 35, in place of the original's "the wilderness of Fayette, Seneca county" Decker's version reads "the wilderness of Faith, Seance county." Is this pure chance?<sup>123</sup> And, instead of the early New York town of "Colesville," Decker's purported quotation gives us the sinister but mythical town of "Collusive." I am unable to suggest an innocent explanation for such "typos."

### **Purported Errors in Mormon Scripture**

- Decker repeats the venerable anti-Mormon claim that the Book of Mormon contradicts Latter-day Saint beliefs (pp. 356–58), but excuses himself on grounds of lack of time from presenting any real evidence or analysis to support his assertion.

- Decker ridicules the account given in 3 Nephi 11:14–15 of the people, at Christ's invitation, coming forward to touch the wounds in his hands and feet. In a clear effort to make the story implausible, he informs his readers that "most LDS experts" estimate that "about a half-million people" participated in this experience (p. 252).<sup>124</sup> He cites no source for this claim, and gives no evidence of having polled the "experts," so one is at a loss to know how he came up with the figure—especially in view of the fact that the Book of Mormon itself numbers "the multitude" at "about two thousand and five hundred souls" (3 Nephi 17:25).

- Decker implies that the Book of Mormon contradicts the Bible because people are invited to touch the Savior in 3 Nephi 11:14–15, whereas in John 20:17 "Jesus discouraged Mary Magdalene from touching Him at all" (p. 252). But there is no contradiction whatever. Jesus "discouraged" Mary Magdalene because, as Decker puts it, he had "not yet ascended to [his]

---

<sup>123</sup> Or is it the very kind of attempted subliminal message of which Decker's associate Loftes Tryk accuses the Mormons? See my review of Tryk's *The Best Kept Secrets in the Book of Mormon* in *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 3 (1991): 231–60.

<sup>124</sup> Even were this true, his mathematics would be hugely inaccurate. He says that, if each of the purported 500,000 people had taken thirty seconds to touch Jesus' wounds, "it would have taken almost *three days*" (p. 252, emphasis in original). No, it would have required nearly 174 days. But one should be cautious of overliteralism in any event.

Father." Evidently, though, Jesus made an initial ascension to the Father—not yet “*the* Ascension”—immediately after his conversation with Mary. In any event, later in the day there clearly remained no prohibition against “touching” him. For, that very evening, Jesus appeared in the midst of the disciples who were gathered in the upper room, and said, “Behold my hands and my feet, that it is I myself: handle me, and see; for a spirit hath not flesh and bones as ye see me have. And when he had thus spoken, he shewed them his hands and his feet” (Luke 24:39-40). Surely Decker knows this passage; it is a favorite Latter-day Saint missionary scripture. Moreover, only a few verses after the text Decker uses for his attack on the Book of Mormon, Jesus is depicted as having invited the apostle Thomas, about a week after the resurrection, to do precisely what the Nephites in the New World also did (John 20:26-29).

• Incidentally, although the King James Version of John 20:17 has Jesus command Mary Magdalene “Touch me not,” the meaning of the Greek *μή μου ἄπτου* is actually “Stop clinging to me.”<sup>125</sup> Most modern translations of the Bible now reflect this. The New American Standard Bible, for instance, renders it in exactly those words. The New American Bible translates the phrase as “Stop holding on to me,” while the Revised English Bible, the Amplified Bible, and the New Jerusalem Bible offer “Do not cling to me.” Both the New International Version (beloved among conservative Protestants) and the New Revised Standard Version render John 20:17 as “Do not hold on to me.” Each of these renderings conveys well the implication of the original Greek present middle imperative, namely that Mary Magdalene was *already* “touching” or, better, “clinging” to the Savior and that he was simply asking her to let him go. There is not even the slightest hint, contrary to Decker, of some mysterious

---

<sup>125</sup> This is the translation supplied by William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago, 1957), 102. Arndt and Gingrich define *ἄπτω* in the middle voice (as it appears at John 20:17) as “touch,” “take hold of,” “hold someone or something.” The standard English-language dictionary of classical Greek gives, as the primary meanings of *ἄπτω*, “to fasten oneself to,” “to cling to,” “to hang on by,” “to lay hold of,” “to grasp,” and, only then, “to touch.” See H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, *An Intermedi-ate Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1889), 112.

prohibition against merely "touching" the body of the resurrected Lord. What is more, these contemporary translations and the modern scholarship that supports them agree with Joseph Smith's reading of John 20:17, provided more than 150 years ago: The Joseph Smith Translation corrected the King James Version's "Touch me not" to "Hold me not." It is precisely, astonishingly, right.<sup>126</sup> How do Decker and his associates explain this?

- Writing of Ether 15:29–31, Decker informs his readers that Shiz's struggle for breath after his beheading at the hands of Coriantumr "violates several biological realities" (p. 114).<sup>127</sup> Unfortunately, though, Ed Decker's grasp of "biological realities" is inadequate for the evaluation of the story. Dr. Gary Hadfield, professor of neuropathology at the Medical College of Virginia, Virginia Commonwealth University, whose knowledge of biology *is* adequate, has recently shown that the account of Shiz's demise given in the Book of Mormon is entirely plausible.<sup>128</sup>

- Decker asserts without real argument that the Gadianton robbers in the Book of Mormon were modeled on contemporary Masonry (pp. 210–11, 280).<sup>129</sup> He fails to refute or even notice my extended argument against that claim, published and easily available since 1990.<sup>130</sup>

---

<sup>126</sup> F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. Robert W. Funk (Chicago and London: University of Chicago, 1961), 172 (336.3), say of Mary Magdalene's action that it "has already happened or has been attempted."

<sup>127</sup> This argument, such as it is, has become rather popular recently. Hanegraaff, "Foreword," 6, says the story is "silly." John R. Farkas and David A. Reed also ridicule it as an "absurdity" in their disappointing *Mormonism: Changes, Contradictions, and Errors* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 152.

<sup>128</sup> For a summary of his findings, see Gary Hadfield, "The 'Decapitation' of Shiz," *Insights* (November 1994): 2; see also Gary Hadfield, "Neuropathology and the Scriptures," *BYU Studies* 33/2 (1993): 313–28.

<sup>129</sup> Like others who have advanced this antique claim, he recognizes the contradiction in claiming that Joseph Smith hated Freemasonry so much that he implicitly condemned it in his Book of Mormon, but loved it so much that he based his temple rituals on it (p. 211; cf. 280). Having noted the problem, he passes on unfazed.

<sup>130</sup> Daniel C. Peterson, "Notes on 'Gadianton Masonry,'" in *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 174–224.

• “What,” demands Decker with reference to the word *adieu* in Jacob 7:27, “is a French word doing in a document supposedly written by a Hebrew in America around 421 B.C.? This is almost a millennium before French existed as a language!” (p. 113). How long must we put up with such nonsense? This absurd criticism has been blown away so many times, and has staggered to its feet again so often, that one begins to wonder if one has wandered, by mistake, into a Grade B zombie movie.<sup>131</sup> The Book of Mormon claims to be a translation, folks; the word *adieu* was not on the Nephite plates, any more than the words *in the beginning* were in the original Hebrew of Genesis 1:1.

• Decker claims that Latter-day Saints continue to accept the book of Abraham despite “clear, unbiased scholarly tests that prove the Book of Abraham to be a complete fraud” (p. 103; cf. 104), but he neither describes these supposed tests nor troubles himself either to explain just how they have proven the book to be “a complete fraud” or what, precisely, that would entail.

• Decker ridicules the Prophet for having supposedly derived seventy-six words in the book of Abraham from a single Egyptian character (p. 104)—though he never bothers to provide any evidence that the manuscript to which he refers was actually the source of the book of Abraham.

### Decker’s Abuse of the Bible and Ancient History

Decker is given to offering up sometimes lengthy lists of irrelevant scriptures (as at pp. 75–76), which, in ways that are entirely opaque to me, are supposed to disprove Latter-day Saint claims.<sup>132</sup> Presumably he interprets them differently than we do,

---

<sup>131</sup> I have already addressed this truly phony issue in Peterson, “Chattanooga Cheapshot,” 58–60.

<sup>132</sup> Compare page 81, where the relevance of 2 Samuel 22:31 to the proposition that “the Bible . . . claims that it cannot be permanently altered” is not at all evident. And Matthew 5:18, cited on page 82 to show that the text of the Hebrew Bible has been perfectly preserved, seems in context to be talking about something else altogether. Besides, do even fundamentalist Protestant scholars really believe that the textual history of the Bible is completely without problems? On the same page, in an astonishing case of misapplied metaphor, Decker takes the declaration of Hebrews 4:12 that “the word of God is quick” to mean that the Bible is actually, in some sense, alive. Thus, if anybody had actually

and imagines that this not-very-interesting autobiographical fact shows us to be wrong. He also fundamentally misunderstands the ancient world out of which the Bible and Christianity emerged. Herewith a few examples, chosen from many that could have been furnished:

### **Bibliolatry**

- In connection with his assault on Joseph Smith, Decker announces, correctly, that “Christianity stands or falls on the character of Jesus—not on the strengths or flaws of Calvin or Luther” (p. 366). But he has chosen the wrong people for comparison. Isn’t it obvious that the foundations of Christianity would be weakened if we could demonstrate that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were dishonest? Early Christianity, like Mormonism, was composed of human beings. Its leaders were human. Human beings wrote its scriptures, recorded its miracles, made its decisions. Because the primitive church exists only in the far distant past, there is a tendency among many to idealize it, to treat it as if it were some Platonic archetype untouched by human hands.

- “The Mormon church,” Decker complains, “has taken the very document of God by which they must be judged and have instead become its judge” (p. 75). But he misunderstands the early history of the scriptural canon. The Christian church existed before there was a New Testament or a Christian Bible, and, thus, was the “judge” of scripture from the very first. This is how a spokesman for Eastern Orthodox Christianity puts the matter:

The Bible never has been and never can be “alone.” It was the Orthodox Catholic Church that finally decided what books belonged in the Bible and what did not. In the era following the death of the Apostles, there were many books that claimed to be Apostolic Scripture. The Church decided what books were authentic and what were not, based on whether or

---

ever removed anything from it, it would have been “like trying to remove your appendix without your permission.” Convincing, isn’t it? On pages 165 and 327, Decker misapplies 1 Corinthians 15:43–46 (a discussion of the nature of resurrected bodies) in an assault on the concept of a premortal existence (to which it is completely unrelated).

not those books conformed to the oral tradition she had received from the Apostles. Without the Church there would be no Bible.<sup>133</sup>

- Decker assures his audience that “No tampering has been successful in permanently altering the biblical text” (p. 79). But how would he, could he, possibly know? Presumably, if the text had been “permanently” altered, any evidence of such alteration would have disappeared.

### Mingled with Scripture

- “Mormons deny the historic Christian doctrine of original sin” (p. 145), says Decker, and he places this concept “at the very core of Christian theology” (p. 315). But he is wrong to do so, for it developed quite late in Christian thought, and is not biblical.<sup>134</sup>

- According to Decker, “the biblical God . . . made the entire universe from nothing” (p. 369).<sup>135</sup> This is, however, not true. It is not until the second half of the second century after Christ that a belief in creation from nothing begins to emerge within Christianity. Mainstream modern scholarship cannot locate the notion in the Bible.<sup>136</sup>

- Decker tells his readers that “The biblical God is by definition (both scriptural and philosophical) the “unmoved Mover” (p. 328). If Ed Decker can locate any passage in the Bible where God is “defined” as the “unmoved Mover,” I will write a personal check for a thousand dollars to Ex-Mormons for

---

<sup>133</sup> O’Callaghan, *An Eastern Orthodox Response to Evangelical Claims*, 12. For comparable Roman Catholic statements, see Peterson and Ricks, *Offenders for a Word*, 122–23.

<sup>134</sup> See the discussion and further references supplied by Peterson and Ricks, *Offenders for a Word*, 133–37. Stendahl, *Final Account*, 10, observes that St. Augustine, in some ways the inventor of the doctrine of original sin, was able to find it in Romans 5 only because he based his thinking on a mistranslation of the relevant passage.

<sup>135</sup> He cites Genesis 1:1–2 and Hebrews 11:3 in support of his pronouncement, but neither passage is relevant.

<sup>136</sup> See the discussion and references given by Peterson and Ricks, *Offenders for a Word*, 95–96; add to these references B. R. Tilghman, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 44 n. 10.

Jesus. Since I am serenely confident that he will never be able to do it, I am pleased that he provides so unmistakable a demonstration that his view of God rests on the philosophies of men, rather than scripture.

### An Apostate Denies the Apostasy

• Decker maintains, on page 343, that “the Mormon doctrine of a great apostasy contradicts the Bible where Jesus said that He would be ‘with you alway, even unto the end of the world’ (Matthew 28:20) and that ‘upon this rock will I build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it’ (Matthew 16:18).”

I’ll take the two cited scriptures in order. Matthew 28:20 features the Savior promising his disciples that he would be with them “unto the end of the *αἰων*.” The King James Version of the Bible renders *αἰων* as “world,” but this is not necessarily correct. Our word “eon” or “aeon” comes from *αἰων*, and it is not surprising, therefore, that the word’s meanings include “lifetime,” “age,” “generation,” “era,” “epoch,” and “period.”<sup>137</sup> Thus a Latter-day Saint could easily interpret Jesus’s promise as extending “to the end of the age” (as many if not most contemporary translations do)<sup>138</sup> or, even, “to the end of the dispensation.” Matthew 28:20 definitely does not rule out the possibility of a “great apostasy.” In fact, if this verse is problematic for anybody, it would seem to be problematic for those who, like Decker, want to use it to rule out the possibility of a massive apostasy of the early church.<sup>139</sup>

Those who want to use Matthew 16:18 as a proof-text against the Latter-day Saint teaching of a universal apostasy like to take the word “Hell” in the King James phrase “the gates of Hell” in

---

<sup>137</sup> Liddell and Scott, *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon*, 25; Arndt and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 26–27.

<sup>138</sup> See, for instance, the New American Standard Bible, the New International Version, the Amplified Bible, the New American Bible, and the New Revised Standard Version.

<sup>139</sup> I might parenthetically add that the fact of the apostasy seems to me, as a historian, utterly obvious, and one of the strongest evidences for the calling of the Prophet Joseph Smith.



a typically fundamentalist Protestant sense, decked out with all the conventional paraphernalia of diabolical torture. But there is no justification in the text for doing so. The Greek word underlying "Hell" is "Hades." Now, anyone who knows anything about ancient Greek concepts surely knows that Hades is not Hell, but simply the general destination of (all) the dead. It is precisely equivalent to the Hebrew "Sheol," and means something like "the spirit world." It is not evil, nor is it, as a whole, under the control of evil. So the promise is not that the powers of *evil* will not overcome the Church, since the spirit world is all-inclusive and, thus, morally neutral, but that the powers of *death* will not overcome the Church. And this promise is wholly appropriate to the context of Matthew 16:18, which prominently features the granting of priesthood sealing keys to Peter. Thus, far from being an argument against Mormon belief in the Great Apostasy, Matthew 16 is a charter for the great work of redeeming the dead.

### **"History Is Bunk!"**

- Decker asserts without evidence that Latter-day Saints hold the Bible to be "finally only a *human* book, not a *divine* book," "merely a fallible, human book" (p. 80, emphasis in the original). It would have been helpful if he had supplied some evidence for this false claim. In any event, his stark opposition of "human" to "divine" grossly mischaracterizes the Bible, which is, precisely, a record of *interactions* between the "human" and the "divine."

- Decker mocks the Latter-day Saint belief that truth may be had through prayer. He prefers the "objective truth" to be found in the Bible (p. 368). But how does he know that the Bible is true? Because it says it is? Then how is he to prefer it to the Qur<sup>ʿ</sup>ān, which makes similar claims, or to the principal Upanishads? As any competent student of geometry knows, every system of belief ultimately rests upon axioms or propositions that cannot be justified from within the system.

- Decker claims that Mormons have a false notion of God. In the Hebrew Bible, he observes, the names *Yahweh* and *Elohim* refer to the same personage, and not, as Mormons would tend to think, to two different persons (pp. 247–48). However, recent bib-

lical scholarship strongly suggests that Yahweh and El or Elohim were originally separate beings, who were collapsed into one only relatively late.<sup>140</sup> Thus, it would seem, the revelations given to Joseph Smith miraculously restored to the world an authentically ancient Israelite understanding of the Father and the Son.

- Contrary to Decker, Ashtoreth was *not* the consort of Baal in Canaanite mythology, and “Asherah” (the name of Baal’s consort) is not the plural of “Ashtoreth.” Furthermore, “Baal” does not mean “Sun” (for these assertions, see pp. 63–64).

- Decker claims that the fact that, in Latter-day Saint conception, God is corporeal and anthropomorphic “makes the LDS deity much more akin to the many pagan idols from all over the world than it does to the God of Christianity” (p. 244). But it is ridiculous for Decker to attempt to equate “the Mormon god” with the false deity Baal merely because some Canaanites may have thought of Baal anthropomorphically (see pp. 64–65). The difference between Baal and Jehovah certainly did not center in the details of their anatomy. There is an abundance of biblical and extrabiblical evidence to indicate that early Jews and Christians of the biblical period and beyond commonly believed God to be corporeal. I shall mention here only a very recently available text from the Dead Sea Scrolls: *Sapiential Work A* (4Q416 frg. 1, line 17) seems to describe God as “a creature of flesh.”<sup>141</sup>

- Decker mocks Latter-day Saints for pointing to the lost book of Jasher mentioned in Joshua 10:13, and then failing to include in their canon the *Book of Jasher* that is sold in many Mormon bookstores (p. 83). He does not explain why we are

---

<sup>140</sup> For two quite accessible examples of this recent scholarship, see Margaret Barker, *The Great Angel: A Study of Israel's Second God* (Louisville: Knox, 1992); Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1990). Larry Hurtado's *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), is perhaps also relevant in this context.

<sup>141</sup> I am using the translation of Professor Torleif Elgvin, of the Norwegian Lutheran School of Theology, as given in his yet-to-be-published paper, “Early Essene Eschatology: Judgment and Salvation according to Sapiential Work A.” (I thank Dr. Alan C. Ashton for first bringing this passage to my attention.) For a sampling of other references, see Peterson and Ricks, *Offenders for a Word*, 74–75.

obliged to canonize a medieval forgery simply because it borrows the name of a lost ancient book of scripture.

- Decker cites the reference, in 2 Chronicles 9:29, to the lost “book of Nathan the prophet,” and “the prophecy of Ahijah the Shilonite,” and the record of “the visions of Iddo the seer.” “Nowhere,” he asserts, “are these books called inspired writing or God’s Word” (p. 84). Well. If they are cited with implicit approval by the author of a biblical book, and are described using such terms as “prophet,” “prophecy,” and “visions,” just what is it that Decker wants in order to certify them as “inspired”?

- Decker sets out the rule that all revelations must agree with what is already written in the Bible (p. 121). “Since God cannot change (Malachi 3:6), His Word cannot contradict itself. The Old Testament must judge the New, and the entire Bible must judge any subsequent revelation” (p. 342; cf. 343). Really? Is there anything, honestly, in the Old Testament that would suggest that we should believe in a metaphysical Trinity, “neither confusing the Persons nor dividing the Substance” thereof? Isn’t that doctrine a clear and unmistakable innovation? (Ask a devout and knowledgeable Jew.) Are Christians, or even Christian Jews, obliged to keep the Passover? Yet the narratives of the institution of the Passover clearly say that it should be kept “for ever.”<sup>142</sup> Do fundamentalist Protestants strictly observe the Sabbath? No, they do not. Do they think that Jewish converts to Christianity must keep the Sabbath or fall under divine condemnation? No, they cannot, for salvation is by grace alone, and not by works. Yet Exodus 31:16–17 indisputably says that the Sabbath is “a perpetual covenant” and “a sign between [the Lord] and the children of Israel for ever.” And is there anything in the Old Testament<sup>143</sup> that would even suggest to an unbiased reader that “circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing” (1 Corinthians 7:19)? Or that “in Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision” (Galatians 5:6)? As is well known, the apostle Paul argued against the need for circumcision. Yet in Genesis 17:13, God calls circumcision “an everlasting covenant.” Finally, doesn’t the important revelation given to Peter in Acts 10:9–18, in

---

<sup>142</sup> At, among other passages, Exodus 12:14, 17, 24.

<sup>143</sup> Say, in Genesis 17:7–14, Exodus 12:48, or Ezekiel 44:9.

which he is divinely commanded to eat "unclean" things (and, therefore, by extension, to take the gospel to the previously "unclean" Gentiles) directly and dramatically contradict the prohibitions of Leviticus 11:2-47? (Certainly Peter thought so. That is the underlying assumption of the whole episode.) It would seem, therefore, that Decker's rule that all revelations must agree with what is already written was unknown to the early Christians.

- Decker contrasts the Latter-day Saint belief in the laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost with the story in Acts 2 of the Holy Ghost falling upon the apostles and others "without anyone touching them" (pp. 272-73). Yet surely even he knows, from his two decades as a "temple Mormon," that Latter-day Saints routinely distinguish between "the gift of the Holy Ghost," the right to the Holy Ghost's constant companionship which is conferred by the laying on of hands, and particular instances of the Holy Ghost falling upon people (whether members or non-members of the Church). Thus, the contradiction that he claims to find does not exist in Latter-day Saint thinking.

- With regard to 1 Corinthians 15:29, Decker claims that "there is ample evidence that there was a pagan cult in the city of Corinth familiar to the readers of Paul's epistle. This cult did baptize for the dead" (p. 69).<sup>144</sup> It would have been really nice to have seen at least one tiny little bit of this "ample evidence," since nobody else seems to have heard of it. The prominent Lutheran scholar Krister Stendahl summarizes the actual situation quite well: "The text seems to speak plainly enough about a practice within the Church of vicarious baptism for the dead. This is the view of most contemporary critical exegetes."<sup>145</sup>

- Commenting on the interest in ancient Gnosticism among some Latter-day Saint scholars, Decker exclaims that "the Nag Hammadi community was far from Christianity. They were Gnostics!" (p. 217). But modern scholars routinely refer to the ancient Gnostics as Christians.<sup>146</sup> (Decker has some sort of standard for determining who is Christian and who is not [see p. 417]. He

---

<sup>144</sup> On page 218, Decker claims that it was Gnostics who were practicing baptism for the dead.

<sup>145</sup> Krister Stendahl, "Baptism for the Dead: Ancient Sources," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 1:97.

<sup>146</sup> See Peterson and Ricks, *Offenders for a Word*, 52-53.

never makes it explicit, for examination, nor does he ever explain where he received his authority to pronounce unilateral judgment on the matter.)

- Decker dismisses the Latter-day Saint teaching that “men must experience evil in order to prize the good” as a “peculiar, Gnostic doctrine” (p. 146). However, this teaching is neither peculiarly, nor uniquely, nor even particularly, Gnostic.

### Fantastic Factory

Decker claims that “hundreds of thousands” of Latter-day Saints have left Mormonism for his fundamentalist Protestant form of Christianity (p. 90). As usual, he cites no evidence for this.<sup>147</sup> In fact, despite Ed Decker’s many years of campaigning against it, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints continues to grow at an astonishing rate. (Or, as he himself puts it, “Mormonism is still ravaging souls and sending people to hell by the millions” [p. 137].) Church membership has roughly doubled since Decker’s 1976 apostasy.

This has to be disconcerting to him. At least, it *should* be . . . if Decker’s true aim is to combat Mormonism. But his astonishing career in what can only be called professional religious bigotry shows him to be nothing if not resilient. No matter how many times he has been caught telling transparent lies, no matter how badly he fails in his proclaimed mission, he continues to flourish.

I have been told of an occasion, some years ago, when Ed Decker went out to a restaurant with several Latter-day Saints. One of the Mormons, a fairly well-known defender of the Church, sat uncharacteristically silent throughout the lunch, listening. At the end, when they were all getting up from the table and putting on

---

<sup>147</sup> In the past, Decker has boasted of preventing literally millions of people from joining the Church in the first place. See *Saints Alive in Jesus Newsletter* (January 1990): 2. He repeated his boast during the 15 May 1990 broadcast of the Christian Research Institute’s program *The Bible Answer Man* (as I heard it on KANN, 1120 AM, Ogden), but withering criticisms obliged him to retract it as an innocent “error” in *Saints Alive in Jesus Newsletter* (July 1990): 2. Tanner and Tanner, *Serious Charges against the Tanners*, 29–33, offer a fascinating account of the incident, concluding that “the facts speak for themselves; a fabricated story has been created by Mr. Decker and it has been widely circulated throughout the land.”

their coats, he suddenly remarked, "Ed, you strike me as somebody who stays up at night wondering, not 'Is this right?', but 'Can I get away with this?'" Unfortunately, *Decker's Complete Handbook* bears out that unflattering assessment.

An acquaintance once warned the American circus impresario P. T. Barnum that the trickery in his "museum" was so obvious to everyone who entered that they would never come back. Of course they will, he famously replied. "There's a sucker born every minute." I find it very hard to quarrel with Mr. Barnum: A glossy half-page magazine advertisement for the *Handbook* praises its author as "one of today's most respected authorities on Mormonism."<sup>148</sup> "What a great response we have had to this book!" reports a recent issue of Ed Decker's newsletter. "We can barely keep it in stock."<sup>149</sup> Recently, though, I ran across a cartoon in which, standing next to a massive mainframe computer and in front of a blackboard covered with scribbled equations, a bearded scientist is shown talking to his secretary. "We'd better alert the press, Miss Marple," he says. "As it turns out, there's a sucker born every 0.6 minute." If the scientist's equations are correct, it is sadly conceivable that, in some circles, *Decker's Complete Handbook on Mormonism* will be a triumphant success.

---

<sup>148</sup> See *Christian Research Journal* 18/1 (Summer 1995): 39.

<sup>149</sup> *Saints Alive in Jesus Newsletter* (March-May 1995): 3.