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Abstract Review of *Questions to Ask Your Mormon Friend: Effective Ways to Challenge a Mormon's Arguments without Being Offensive* (1994), by Bill McKeever and Eric Johnson.

Bill McKeever and Eric Johnson. *Questions to Ask Your Mormon Friend: Effective Ways to Challenge a Mormon's Arguments without Being Offensive.* Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1994. viii + 184 pp., with glossary and bibliography. \$8.99.

Reviewed by LeIsle Jacobson

Bill McKeever, author of *Answering Mormons' Questions*, and Eric Johnson, author of the booklet *Quetzalcoat: Jesus in the Americas*, set themselves two goals, which they believe the book *Questions to Ask Your Mormon Friend* will fulfill. These goals are as follows: (1) Providing effective ways to challenge a Mormon's arguments without being offensive (book cover and title page). (2) Using the formula of "reason, logical arguments, and the word of God" to prove that Latter-day Saint doctrine is in error (pp. 9–11).

It is the purpose of this review to examine briefly how successful the authors have been in meeting their goals.

Nonoffensive?

McKeever and Johnson promise to teach their readers how to challenge Mormon beliefs without being offensive. With that in mind, the introduction of their book brings up many worthwhile ideas and comments:

- "While it is important to raise questions as Paul did on Mars Hill in Athens (see Acts 17), we do not need to offend the hearer" (p. 10).
- "Avoid telling Mormons what they believe. Instead, ask them what their position is on a certain issue" (p. 10).

- “Make sure to define your terms. . . . Mormonism has adopted Christian terminology while substituting its private definitions” (p. 11).

Had the authors stopped with the introduction of the book, McKeever and Johnson might very well have managed to meet their goal of producing an example of nonoffensive anti-Mormon literature. But *Questions to Ask Your Mormon Friend* is little more than a rehashing of material drawn from previous anti-Mormon books. Since most of the arguments and accusations presented in *Questions to Ask Your Mormon Friend* have, in the past, proven to be at least mildly offensive to the majority of Latter-day Saint members, it is hard to understand why the authors believed these same arguments would fail to offend this time around. In addition, the authors ignore much of the good advice that they gave to their readers and thus produce the same negative confrontations that they tell their readers to avoid. A couple of examples follow:

Good Advice: “Avoid telling Mormons what they believe. Instead, ask them what their position is on a certain issue.” (p. 10)

What Mormons say:

Though the First Presidency endorsed the publication of the *Journal [of Discourses]*, there was no endorsement as to the accuracy or reliability of the contents. There were occasions when the accuracy was questionable. (p. 39)¹

Of course it is true that many Latter-day Saints, from the Presidents of the Church and members of the Quorum of the Twelve down to individual members who may write books or articles, have expressed their own opinions on doctrinal matters. Nevertheless, until such opinions are presented to the Church in general conference and sustained by vote of the conference,

¹ Citing Gerald E. Jones, in *A Sure Foundation: Answers to Difficult Gospel Questions* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 200.

they are neither binding nor the official doctrine of the Church. (p. 35)²

What McKeever and Johnson tell the Mormons they *really* believe:

Since the accuracy of the *Journal* is an artificial excuse, it would seem to appear that the reason Mormons do not take the volumes seriously is because they expose the heretical teachings of past leaders. Mormons who have read and downplay the *Journal of Discourses* know these aberrational teachings undermine the authority and claims of the LDS Church. (p. 42)

What Mormons teach:

Behold, you have not understood; you have supposed that I would give it unto you, when you took no thought save it was to ask me. But behold, I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore, you shall feel that it is right. (D&C 9:7–8; only verse 8 of this section is quoted in McKeever and Johnson, p. 66)

What McKeever and Johnson say Mormons *really* believe:

When sharing their faith, many Mormons (especially the LDS missionaries) will challenge potential converts to first, read the *Book of Mormon* and second, pray about its message to see if it is true. Mormons are taught that a “burning in the bosom,” of good feelings, will occur if this test is taken. It is assumed that rational thought should be disregarded while this so-called spiritual test is applied. (p. 65)

² Stephen E. Robinson, *Are Mormons Christian?* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1991), 15.

Good Advice: “Make sure to define your terms. . . . Mormonism has adopted Christian terminology while substituting its private definitions.” (p. 11)

The authors go so far as to provide a glossary of terms at the end of their book to help facilitate communication between non-members and members, yet throughout the book the authors themselves fail to recognize the definitions which Mormons give to many words. This practice cannot help but produce communication problems between Mormons and nonmembers who attempt to use McKeever and Johnson's arguments in a conversation.

For example:

Testimony: When Mormons say “burning in the bosom,” they are speaking of a confirmation given by the Holy Spirit, but the authors define “burning in the bosom” and “testimony” as “good feelings” or “strong feelings” or “happy feelings” (pp. 182, 65, 70), with no acknowledgment of the Latter-day Saint belief in the influence of the Spirit.

Prophet: When Mormons say *a prophet* they are speaking of a man who acts as the mouthpiece of God. When a prophet speaks for God, his words are the words of God and the prophet's mortal status has no bearing on the validity of God's words. The authors, on the other hand, make much of the fact that the Latter-day Saint prophets are men who are subject to infirmities of age and error of judgment—therefore, in the view of the authors, trusting the words of these men is the same as trusting in mortal man (p. 71–77). The authors fail to recognize that such arguments have no meaning to a member of a church that teaches that prophets can be imperfect and yet still be tools in the hands of God.

Scripture: The authors, on several occasions, address the question of which is best: scripture, or the words from living prophets? (p. 77) Since, by Latter-day Saint definition, scriptures are the written words of God *as given through the prophets* it is illogical to try to put one above the other.

Together: The authors ask, “If Mormon Families Will Be Together Forever, Where Will the In-Laws Live?” (p. 107)—the argument which follows this question is that it is impossible for a large extended family to all live together in the same place; therefore, the doctrine of the eternal family is illogical (p. 111). How-

ever, Mormons don't define "together" as "all in the same place"—rather, the belief that families can be together throughout eternity is a belief that family ties will continue to exist after death, in much the same way that family ties continue to exist even when children grow up and leave home.

Christian: As the question heading for chapter one, the authors ask, "If I accept you as a Christian, will you accept me as a Mormon?" (p. 13). To a Latter-day Saint member this question makes about as much sense as an alley cat asking a pampered Persian, "If I call you a cat, will you call me a housecat?" According to Latter-day Saint definition, the Mormons, the Methodists, the Catholics, the Baptists, the Anglicans, etc., are all subgroups within the greater category of "Christian" religions.

In order for the question heading for chapter one to make sense one must presuppose that the Mormon being questioned will agree that his friend has some exclusive right to the title of "Christian." Yet McKeever and Johnson admit that Mormons insist that they are followers of Christ, or *Christians* (pp. 13–14).

Omnipotent: The authors define *omnipotence* as meaning "to have more power than any other" and proceed to present an argument against the doctrine of deification that is based on this definition, i.e., there can't be more than one God because the definition of omnipotent rules out the possibility of anyone but God being omnipotent (p. 121). But the authors' definition is by no means the only, or even the most widely accepted, definition of *omnipotent*, and their logic fails when they are speaking to someone who does not accept their definition. *Omnipotent* may also be defined as having "unlimited power" (Webster's Dictionary, 1977, p. 223), a definition which would allow more than one being to share the characteristic of "omnipotence."

Infinite vs. Finite: The authors present several philosophical arguments to support the idea that finite beings are incapable of gaining infinite knowledge (p. 121); therefore, no finite being can be omniscient. This, the authors feel, makes it logically impossible for men to become like God. Yet the authors are aware that the Latter-day Saint Church teaches that intelligence is eternal (p. 165), thus a man's time here on Earth may be finite, but the intelligence which he possesses is infinite. Therefore, the authors'

arguments regarding finite beings and infinite knowledge are invalid within the framework of Latter-day Saint beliefs.

If the authors truly intend to convince members of the Latter-day Saint Church by logic and reason that there are errors in the doctrines of their church, they cannot use arguments and definitions that are valid only within the framework of their own personal beliefs.

Reason and Logic?

Do McKeever and Johnson use arguments that would sound reasonable and logical to a faithful member of the Latter-day Saint Church? One characteristic that one would expect from a reasonable argument is consistency. Yet McKeever and Johnson offer us contradicting arguments and ideas. For example:

Do we say we are different or do we say we are the same?

The authors suggest that Mormons can't be Christians because they themselves say that they are different from other Christian churches (pp. 20–22). This suggestion contradicts their earlier position that the Latter-day Saint Church is engaged in a campaign to convince nonmembers that they are just another Christian church (p. 14). The authors also state that it is possible for individuals to convert to the Latter-day Saint Church with the misunderstanding that it is "just another Christian denomination" (p. 10). And the authors accuse Mormons of misleading Christians with such statements as Mormonism is " 'just the same' as biblical Christianity" (p. 22).

However, in conflict to their earlier position, the authors say that "Mormon leaders since Joseph Smith's day have continually emphasized the differences, not the similarities, between Mormonism and Christianity" (p. 22). If Mormon leaders are continually emphasizing the differences between Latter-day Saint Church doctrine and Christian creeds it is not likely that the members of the Latter-day Saint Church would go about telling all their friends that the Mormon Church is just like every other Christian church. Nor is it likely that a convert to the Church

would fail to understand, at least in part, that Latter-day Saint doctrine differs on many points from Protestant or Catholic doctrines.

Does the Holy Ghost play a part in bringing souls to Christ?

The authors argue that "it is the place of the Holy Spirit to convict [?] hearts and bring souls unto Christ" (p. 10), yet the authors then devote an entire chapter to the idea that the truth about Christ and gospel doctrine can be found only by an objective study of the Bible (pp. 65–70). If it is the place of the Holy Spirit to convict hearts and bring souls to Christ, how does the Holy Spirit manifest his influence? The authors condemn the idea that the Spirit can be manifest through feelings of peace and joy, yet offer no alternative way by which the Spirit might manifest itself to man.

Trusting Mortal Men?

The authors condemn the members of the Latter-day Saint Church for putting their trust in the words of living prophets because the Latter-day Saint prophets are "mere mortal men" (pp. 71–77). Yet the authors are comfortable relying on the interpretation of scriptures made by other mortal men. For example:

We do not know a single evangelical Christian commentator who suggests that this verse (James 1:5) advocates praying about a religion to see if it might be true. (p. 68)

Christian scholar F. F. Bruce states: "We are then, the offspring of God, says Paul, not in any pantheistic sense but in the sense of the biblical doctrine of man, as beings created by God in his own image." (p. 116)

Is it wrong to quote pagans?

The authors condemn Milton R. Hunter for referencing pagan beliefs concerning the deification of men when speaking of Latter-day Saint beliefs concerning this doctrine (p. 118). Yet Paul found nothing wrong with quoting pagans in support of the truth (Acts 17:28), and the authors are willing enough to refer to Paul, even when he is quoting pagans (pp. 10, 67–68).

Can true Christians have personal opinions?

McKeever and Johnson insist that the variances and vagaries of Christian doctrine are unimportant because all Christians have a set core of beliefs and this core of beliefs is what defines them as Christians (pp. 14–15, 21); however, they make an issue of the fact that Mormons disagree among themselves regarding various speculations and theories that are not considered official Latter-day Saint teachings (p. 34).

Is it in the scriptures?

McKeever and Johnson find fault with the fact that many Latter-day Saint beliefs and ordinances are not drawn word for word from the scriptures (pp. 34–37). Yet the definition of the Trinity given by the authors (p. 183) is not found in the Bible; rather (as the authors point out), it is a derivative of the Athanasian Creed which was composed centuries after the death of Christ.

Are prophets scientists?

McKeever and Johnson seem to think that statements made by Church leaders which are not accurate according to modern scientific views indicate that these leaders can't be trusted to provide correct information regarding the will of God (p. 35). Yet they do not judge so harshly the writings of the Bible that include such statements as "All fowls that creep, going upon *all* four . . ." (Leviticus 11:20, KJV) and "he said in the sight of Israel, Sun, stand thou still upon Gibeon; and thou, Moon, in the valley of Ajalon. And the sun stood still, and the moon stayed . . ." (Joshua 10:12–13, KJV).

Does the word of God change?

According to McKeever and Johnson, "If the words of the prophet are of equal validity to the written word, Mormons cannot be so quick to distance themselves from past teachings" (p. 37). Yet, presumably, McKeever and Johnson do not make regular burnt offerings of a dove or lamb to the Lord, nor is it likely that they believe that male children must be circumcised. One might say that McKeever and Johnson are distancing "themselves from past teachings" of the Bible by not following the Mosaic law—unless one, perhaps, accepts that each successive prophet instructs the Church to follow the Lord's will in the manner that is pleasing to the Lord at that time.

Can truth change?

The authors reason, "If 'truth' can change with the induction of a new Mormon prophet, then Mormons really are doing nothing more than trusting in a mere mortal man" (p. 39). If *truth* cannot change (or, as is actually the case, be clarified or expanded), with the induction of a new prophet, then one must of necessity reject the "truths" revealed by Christ since these truths were certainly a large change from many of the "truths" that were taught in the Old Testament (for examples, see Matthew 5:21–22, 27–28, 31–44).

Is the Bible translated correctly?

The authors condemn the Latter-day Saint Church for approaching the Bible with the caution that it is the word of God "as far as it is translated correctly" (pp. 45–53). But the authors themselves admit that when it comes to Bible translations, "Some are good and some are not so good" (p. 52).

Logical and Consistent Criteria?

Another characteristic of a reasonable argument is the use of logical and consistent methods of weighing evidence. Yet McKeever and Johnson frequently use standards of measuring "truth" that would condemn their own beliefs as well as Latter-

day Saint doctrine. It is inconsistent to apply one standard of measurement to living prophets and nonbiblical Latter-day Saint scriptures, and another standard to biblical prophets and scriptures. In addition, many of the arguments used by the authors are shown to be sheer nonsense when taken to their logical conclusion. For example:

Do Christians sects squabble with each other?

The authors suggest that Mormons can't be Christians because some of the leaders of the Latter-day Saint Church have insulted the ministers of other Christian churches and condemned the doctrines of other Christian churches (pp. 15–20).

Taking this argument to its logical conclusion, one must reason that *all* Christian churches who find something wrong with the beliefs of other Christian churches must be excluded from the ranks of Christianity. This is an interesting, if not entirely new, approach to defining the term "Christian," but hardly practical given that Christian churches have always squabbled amongst themselves over which creed is correct, and which creed is an abomination in the sight of the Lord. Indeed, members of Christian churches have made a habit of not only insulting each other, but actually killing each other over such issues.

If, perchance, the world were to accept as a valid definition of Christianity: *Those who never insult or find fault with the doctrines or positions of other Christian churches*, the only true Christian sects would be the "liberal denominations and other groups which place ecumenicism above doctrinal purity" (p. 21). Since the authors find fault with such liberal denominations, the authors would necessarily be excluded from the ranks of Christianity.

Should we condemn all beliefs that might foster sinful pride?

The authors condemn "temple Mormonism" because it "fosters a class society and feeds the ego of those who hold temple recommends. The fact that these Mormons are found 'worthy' places them in a class above those who do not hold recommends. Like the Pharisee of Luke 18, this sinful attitude of

pride can easily become a reality in the Mormon's life" (p. 96). Yet the authors do not condemn Christianity, even though the belief that one is saved, while others are damned, can foster a class society and feed the ego of those who are "saved"—thus causing a sinful attitude of pride to become a reality in a Christian's life.

Did it really happen?

In chapter two the authors ask, "Which first vision account should we believe?" (p. 23). The criteria that are used in chapter two to judge if historical events are real or imagined may be summarized as follows: If an important event is reported *without* variance or error, it actually happened. If an important event is reported *with* variance or error, it did not actually happen (pp. 23–31).

Putting aside the fact that few events in the Bible would pass this test,³ would other important events happening within Joseph Smith's lifetime pass the author's criteria? The authors give us the information that the date on which Alvin died was recorded as "November 19th, 1824 in the 27th year of his age" in the first printing of the official account of the First Vision, yet was changed to "November 19th, 1823" in printings made after 1981, and while the death date on Alvin's headstone agrees with the post-1981 printings of the First Vision, the grave marker says he was twenty-five years old, not twenty-seven (pp. 26–27). According to McKeever and Johnson's criteria, when one considers all the inconsistencies that exist in the reports of Alvin's death, one may conclude that Alvin did not actually die.

How strong is the power of God?

In chapter two of the book, McKeever and Johnson question the existence of the gold plates. Would it be possible, they ask, for Joseph Smith to carry plates made of pure gold, weighing at least

³ For example, consider the differences between the three accounts of the vision of Paul as recorded in Acts 9:1–31, Acts 22:3–21, and Acts 26:9–21, or the variances in the four Gospel accounts of the women going to Jesus' empty tomb early in the morning after the resurrection, as recorded in Matthew 28:1, Mark 16:1, Luke 24:10, and John 20:1.

one hundred pounds, while running, jumping and fighting off attackers? (p. 28). It is inconsistent of the authors to question Joseph Smith's ability to run with a mere one hundred pounds under his arm when they themselves assert that "It is by God's Word, the Bible, that all things are compared" (p. 81). The Bible includes the story of Samson, a man who was able to carry the door of the gate of Gaza to the top of a hill (Judges 16:3) and pull down the supporting pillars of a large house (Judges 16:28-30).

FARMS vs. Moroni?

The authors also pit FARMS against the angel Moroni in an attempt to prove that the gold plates never existed. The FARMS bulletin cover article "Were the Gold Plates Gold?" suggests that the golden plates might have been made of an alloy called "tumbaga," which consists of a mixture of gold and copper. McKeever and Johnson argue,

If the plates were really made of tumbaga, why didn't the angel say, "There was a book deposited, written upon *copper* plates, giving an account of the former inhabitants of this continent?" Because 8k means the metal was only about 33% gold, it probably would have been more correct to say the plates were copper, since roughly 66% of the plates would be composed of that metal. (p. 29)

First, I must say that it is rather absurd of the authors to attempt to hold Moroni, Joseph Smith, or any one else involved with the gold plates accountable for what the researchers at FARMS theorize about the composition of the plates. But supposing that the FARMS researchers are correct and the plates *were* made of tumbaga, it is absurd to insist that the plates should be called "copper," whatever the percentage of copper they might have contained, since "gold" refers to color as well as composition. Tumbaga is "gold" and not "copper" in color.

Unsupported Statements

Logical reasoning does not make use of unsupported or unproven statements, yet such statements occur with liberal frequency between the pages of McKeever and Johnson's book. For example:

- "Again, thanks to Wesley Walters, the court records from 1826 have been discovered to show that Smith was arrested, tried, and convicted for using this stone in his scam operations" (p. 30). But Walters's views have not gone unchallenged. At least one study of Walters's evidence, considered within the context of the legal setting of 1826, concludes that "in 1826 Joseph Smith was indeed charged and tried for being a disorderly person and that he was acquitted."⁴

- "Such conflicting testimony about the different accounts would not make a strong case in a court of law" (p. 31). The authors reference no kind of expert legal opinion to support this statement.

- "This is one reason why the Latter-day Saint Church would rather have prospective converts search for truth through subjective feelings rather than objective evidence" (p. 31). The authors do not reference their claim that the Latter-day Saint Church teaches its converts to search for truth through subjective feelings. I know of no church publication which teaches either members or converts to use "subjective feelings" as a basis for determining truth.

Given the examples of inconsistent reasoning and inaccurate or unsupported statements which can be found in McKeever and Johnson's publication, I would have to judge their attempt to appeal to the Latter-day Saint member through logic and reason a failure.

Using the Word of God?

The authors make use of a fair number of scriptural passages to support their arguments. In this manner, one might say that they have fulfilled their goal to use the "word of God" in an

4 Gordon A. Madsen, "Joseph Smith's 1826 Trial: The Legal Setting," *BYU Studies* 30 (Spring 1990): 106.

attempt to prove that Latter-day Saint doctrine is in error. The difficulty with the authors' task in this area, however, is that members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are not likely to agree with many of the authors' interpretations of scriptures. For example:

The authors quote 2 Timothy 3:16–17: "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works," to support the idea that the only written authority for life and faith is the canonized Bible (p. 177). Yet a Latter-day Saint reading this scripture would include within the definition of "all scripture" the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, the Pearl of Great Price, and any other scriptures which might be brought forth by God in the future.

The authors also quote Hebrews 1:1–2: "God, who at sundry times and in divers manners, spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, Hath in these last days spoken unto us by His Son" to support the idea that Jesus is the living prophet guiding the church today (p. 81). Mormons certainly accept that Christ is at the head of the Church, but the authors seem to be interpreting this scripture to mean that Christ is the last of the prophets and that no other living prophet will be appointed to guide and direct the church on earth. This scripture makes no such claims, nor does any other passage in the Bible.

In short, it is not sufficient to simply quote scripture in order to prove a point of doctrine. Where no consensus on interpretation of scriptures exists, partners in a discussion must, as the authors suggest is necessary on some occasions, "agree to disagree" (p. 10).

Conclusions

A book which truly concentrated on logical arguments that would appeal to the reasoning of informed, faithful members of the Church might have been interesting. But *Questions to Ask Your Mormon Friend* is not that book. Indeed, it is my opinion that the arguments and logic used in McKeever and Johnson's book were designed to appeal to the belief systems of evangelical

Christians, not Mormons. As such, the book might be an effective tool for convincing non-Mormon Christians that the doctrines of the Latter-day Saint Church are different from the doctrines of evangelical Christianity, but it is not likely to convince many Latter-day Saints that the doctrines of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are in error.