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Abstract *Review of Mormonism: Changes, Contradictions, and Errors* (1995), by John R. Farkas and David A. Reed.

John R. Farkas and David A. Reed. *Mormonism: Changes, Contradictions, and Errors*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1995. 256 pp., with bibliography and index. \$11.98.

Reviewed by Craig L. Foster

With their latest combined effort, authors John R. Farkas and David A. Reed have undertaken an impressive task. They have, as they explain in their preface, taken up Joseph Fielding Smith's challenge to detect errors and contradictions of Mormonism through the "accepted standards of measurement, the scriptures."¹

Such an undertaking would be impressive for any scholar. At the minimum, a writer or writers would need a thorough background of Latter-day Saint history and an understanding of the complexities of an open canon and evolving doctrine. Indeed, something of this magnitude would encompass numerous primary and secondary works discussing not only Latter-day Saint but primitive Christian history and theology. It would also have to be an honest, unbiased, scholarly work, probably encompassing several volumes. Unfortunately, Farkas and Reed have fallen far short on all counts.

As the reviewer, I do not question their effort and desire to produce a good work. Both men are obviously well-read and sincere in their efforts to prove to both Mormons and non-Mormons alike that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is wrong. The fact that we have differing views concerning theology and the Bible is, quite honestly, beside the point. While I disagree with their interpretation of scripture and the nature of Christ, I respect their opinions as legitimate in their belief system. No argument is presented that their conception of Christ and the Father is very different from the Latter-day Saint conception. Again, philosophically speaking, that is okay. It does not automatically prove

¹ Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954), 1:188, as quoted in Farkas and Reed, *Mormonism*, 14.

or disprove the truthfulness of “Mormonism” nor “mainstream Christianity.”

Because it is possible to look at the same biblical scripture and have different interpretations, I will not even attempt to bang my head against the wall of semantics in an endless argument over whose interpretation is best. Culture, upbringing, education, personal spiritual experiences, and general worldview all play a part in how people view God, religion, and the scriptures. Very rarely can this chasm of thought be bridged by simple esoteric argument over a scripture. Rather, the problems with this book have to do with scholarship.

What is inherently problematic with this book is that its approach to the subject is unapologetically biased, simplistic, and unprofessional. What could and should be a thoroughly thought-out and scholarly approach to a very interesting question—i.e., does Mormon doctrine stand the scrutiny of analysis?—quickly turns into a pseudoacademic platform from which to attack the Latter-day Saint Church and trumpet the authors’ interpretation of Christianity.

Unfortunately, while both these men are well-educated and well-read in their respective fields, neither appears to have had any training in history or comparative religion. For example, John R. Farkas holds a B.S. degree in mechanical engineering. His only expertise in Mormon doctrine and history appears to derive from his nine-year membership in the church and subsequent study of literature critical of the church.² David A. Reed has even less first-hand experience with the Latter-day Saint Church. A former Jehovah’s Witness, Reed was never a member of the church. Both men now spend their time working in their respective ministries.³

Farkas is president of Berean Christian Ministries, located in Webster, New York. This small ministry’s *raison d’être* appears to

² Farkas’s B.S. in mechanical engineering was earned at the University of Connecticut in 1962. Between 1962 and 1991 he worked at Xerox Corporation as a project engineer and a project engineering manager (p. 202).

³ Reed and his wife were both members of the Watchtower Society for a number of years. While Reed never graduated from a university, he did study both math and government at Harvard on a National Merit scholarship. In a telephone interview with David A. Reed on 30 August 1996, he explained that he left Harvard on a leave of absence, during which time he joined the Watchtower Society and was discouraged from pursuing a higher education.

be its annual distribution of approximately 13,000 pieces of anti-Mormon literature at the Hill Cumorah Pageant. Farkas and his wife, Phyllis, hand out literature at the annual City of Joseph Pageant held in Nauvoo, as well as at various temple open houses.⁴

Reed is president of Gospel Truth Ministries, a small ministry located in Assonet, Massachusetts. This small ministry, which should not be confused with the larger, wealthier ministry located in Grand Rapids, Michigan, is dedicated to ministering to Jehovah's Witnesses and those associated with the Watchtower Society. The ministry's main publication is *Comments from the Friends*, which Reed edits.

Reed appears to be a prolific writer; he has published at least eight books concerning Jehovah's Witnesses. While he himself is apparently well versed in Jehovah's Witness history and doctrine, his books have not always met with approval from the literary community. In a recent review of *Blood on the Altar: Confessions of a Jehovah's Witness Ministry*, which appeared in *Library Journal*, Reed's book was described in the following terms:

[Reed's] work is a strange (and thematically elusive) interweave of three motifs: Reed and wife Penni's 13-year involvement in Jehovah's Witnesses; the history of the sect; and a recital of well-worn mockeries such as failed end-of-the-world Jehovah's Witnesses predictions. . . . Nothing new is revealed in this tedious secondary source.⁵

⁴ Telephone interview with John R. Farkas, 30 August 1996. According to Farkas, who now belongs to an Assembly of God congregation, Berean Christian Ministries is a nonprofit organization with a board of directors that includes two members from the Assemblies of God, one Baptist, and a Presbyterian. The ministry's annual budget is around \$4,500. A small tract, "Berean Christian Ministries" (Webster, N.Y.: Berean Christian Ministries, n.d.), states that the purpose of the ministry is to educate, to equip people to "effectively witness and share the real Jesus to those lost in the cults," and "to actively witness to those involved in the cults via seminars, personal visits, mailings, and tracting."

⁵ "Book Reviews," *Library Journal* 121/10 (1 June 1996): 116-7. Interestingly enough, Reed's book was published by Prometheus Books (1996), a press which pushes humanism to the limits. Indeed, it is a press that appears to disdain Christianity in general and has published an array of books that have attempted to undermine the tenets of Christianity.

Reed was quite hurt by *Library Journal's* review and commented that it was the most negative review of his work that he had ever read. However, he has not been dissuaded by this criticism and has already arranged with Prometheus Books to publish yet another book about the Jehovah's Witnesses.⁶

Reed's publications also extend into the realm of Mormonism. Reed and Farkas, as a team, have written *Mormons Answered Verse by Verse*⁷ and *How to Rescue Your Loved One from Mormonism*.⁸ All three of their collaborative works have been published by Baker Book House, a conservative Christian publishing firm.

Baker Book's publications cover the usual Christian-oriented literature on topics including biblical studies, Christian living, evangelism, pastoral helps, and theology, as well as "cults." The books address Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-Day Adventists, Christian Scientists, New Ageism, UFOs, even Catholicism. Also listed in that section are nine books concerning the Latter-day Saint Church.⁹

In other words, it appears that if various religious denominations and sects have doctrines other than Baker Book House's and its authors' view of "mainstream" Protestant theology, they are, at best, pseudo-Christians, and, at worst, the devil's minions. Although harsh, it is incredible that their categorization of "cults" can span such a wide spectrum of historical background, ideology, and doctrine.

The book quickly reveals that branding Mormonism a "cult" because of different interpretations of Jesus Christ is the approach the authors have taken. Indeed, they are careful to distinguish

⁶ Telephone interview with David A. Reed, 30 August 1996.

⁷ David A. Reed and John R. Farkas, *Mormons Answered Verse by Verse* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1992); see review by Keith J. Wilson in *FARMS Review of Books* 8/1 (1996): 92-4.

⁸ David A. Reed and John R. Farkas, *How to Rescue Your Loved One from Mormonism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1994). Farkas has also written at least eight tracts concerning Mormonism and edits a newsletter titled *The Berean Report*.

⁹ *Complete Catalog* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1996): 108-9. Interestingly enough, Baker Book House, which publishes under five different publishing names, has eleven titles about Jehovah's Witnesses compared to the nine about the LDS Church.

between what they define as real Christians and Mormons. Moreover, the ultimate goal of this book is as a tool in witnessing to Mormons. In fact, one chapter is entitled "Witnessing to Mormons."

Perhaps one of the best examples in the book of an apparent lack of understanding of Latter-day Saint history is the accusation that Joseph Smith and other church leaders did not adhere to the Word of Wisdom. What is ironic is that Farkas and Reed begin this section with a long quotation from the Doctrine and Covenants explaining that the instruction Joseph Smith received in 1833 was given "*not by commandment or constraint, but by revelation and the word of wisdom*" (D&C 89:2).

Farkas and Reed quickly expound on this scripture by using several quotations to prove that members have to obey the Word of Wisdom fully in order to enter the temple and the celestial kingdom (pp. 87–8). However, the authors are either unaware of or have chosen to ignore the fact that the revelation was originally given "not by commandment" and was not strictly enforced for most of the nineteenth century. Indeed, it was not uncommon for early members to partake of alcoholic beverages, coffee, or tea, as can be attested to in numerous journal entries. This was also the case with the sacrament, where the use of both water and wine was common in various congregations until after the turn of the century. It was not until the administrations of Joseph F. Smith (1901–18) and Heber J. Grant (1918–45) that the Word of Wisdom was strictly enforced and adherence to its precepts became necessary for temple worthiness.¹⁰

Three of the four sources from which the authors quote concerning the Word of Wisdom were written and published after the Smith and Grant administrations. Thus the authors have made a serious mistake which most historians learn to guard against in their freshman year at college, i.e., projecting contemporary values on historical people and events. Unfortunately, using modern quotations to judge nineteenth-century people is a very foolish foundation for an argument.

¹⁰ For a good discussion on the development of the Word of Wisdom as a strict tenet of Mormonism, see Thomas G. Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition: A History of the Latter-day Saints, 1890–1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 258–71.

Another example of historical ignorance can be found on page 136. After describing the use of code names in the early Doctrine and Covenants, the authors then quote the Lord, "Nothing is secret . . . neither any thing hid" (Luke 8:17). Obviously they do not take into account the fact that even Jesus kept some things from people for certain periods of time. For example, he charged his disciples that they should tell no one that he was the Christ (Matthew 16:20). Students of early Christianity will also remember that because of persecution, early followers of Christ met together in secret and identified each other with secret signs and symbols. Some of these symbols have remained popular among some Christian groups to the present, such as the X and the line-drawn fish.¹¹

Unfortunately, this ignorance of, or intentional decision to ignore, basic meanings and information is not limited to the previous examples. A second problem with this book is the authors' tendency to ignore parts of quotations and pertinent information. On page 38 the authors take the church to task for having two different phrases in the baptismal prayer. The first prayer is given as follows, "Having authority given me of Jesus Christ, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen" (3 Nephi 11:25), while the second reads, "Having been commissioned of Jesus Christ, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen" (D&C 20:73).

However, rather than these two phrases contradicting each other, their meanings are one and the same. According to Webster's dictionary, one of the definitions of the term *commissioned* is "authority to act for, in behalf of, or in place of another."¹² Desire for a certain point or historical incident to be a certain way does not excuse ignoring proof to the contrary. Nor

¹¹ In terms of scripture and ancient writings, what has become known as the Apocrypha has, at different times during the Christian era, been accepted as holy scripture. Interestingly enough, *apocryphon* (singular for the plural *apocrypha*) is a Greek word meaning "hidden" and is applied to writings believed to contain "secret teachings." Edgar J. Goodspeed, *The Apocrypha: An American Translation* (New York: Vintage, 1959), xvi.

¹² Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, 1983 ed., s.v. "commission."

can giving a partial quote or taking one out of context be excused.

Probably one of the more blatant examples of their using only part of a quotation to help their argument can be found on page 51. In their argument that LDS scriptures contradict each other concerning the practice of plural marriage, the authors quote from the Book of Mormon as proof that plural marriage should not have been practiced:

Wherefore, my brethren, hear me, and hearken to the word of the Lord: For there shall not any man among you have save it be one wife; and concubines he shall have none. (Jacob 2:27)

However, the authors do not continue to verse 30 of the same chapter, nor do they include the cross-reference (D&C 132:63) that has been provided in the scriptures, both of which put not only this scripture but the whole discussion into historical and doctrinal context:

For if I will, saith the Lord of Hosts, raise up seed unto me, I will command my people; otherwise they shall hearken unto these things. (Jacob 2:30)

. . . for they are given unto him to multiply and replenish the earth, according to my commandment. (D&C 132:63)

When these scriptures are read together and placed within both a scriptural and historical context, any scholar can see that they do not contradict each other but show a God who gives and takes as he feels necessary for the personal growth and betterment of his children and for the building up of his kingdom. Indeed, the only apparent contradiction is that put forth by the authors.

While they willingly condemn the plural marriages of early church leaders such as Joseph Smith and Brigham Young, the authors ignore the facts that Abraham and the other patriarchs took plural wives (Genesis 16:1–3, 29:23, 28; 30:4, 9) and that plural marriage was common among the early Israelites. Even so, God saw fit to speak to them and bless them with visions and other miracles. Thus, in their attempt to condemn one aspect of

Mormon doctrine, the authors have left the foundation of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam open to the critical question of whether or not God would deal with people who were living in adultery (according to the authors' narrow interpretation of scripture).

This leads to the third and final problem with this book. The book is flawed because of an illogical and biased thought process and analysis, leaving very little room for rational discourse. While the other two points are frustrating to readers with any background in church history and doctrine, the third point is by far the most serious for those who approach the book with the hope of a thoughtful, intelligent discussion.

For example, on pages 149–52 the authors attack the idea of Zelph the Lamanite's grave being located in Illinois. First they quote from *History of the Church*:

His name was Zelph. He was a warrior and chieftain under the great prophet Onandagus, who was known from the Hill Cumorah, or eastern sea to the Rocky mountains. . . . He was killed in battle by the arrow found among his ribs, during the last great struggle of the Lamanites and Nephites.¹³

They then ridicule Joseph Smith's assertion with the following statement:

How likely is it that a man who got an arrow between his ribs at Hill Cumorah in New York would then travel over 700 miles to die? No, the man Joseph Smith dug up must have been killed near where Smith found him. It does not seem likely that Zelph's friends or comrades carried him to the banks of the Illinois River. They would be looking out for their own lives. Moreover, according to Mormon 6:15 and 8:2, the Nephites as they escaped went southward, not west to the banks of the Illinois River over 700 miles away. (p. 152)

¹³ HC 2:79–80; for a thorough examination of the Zelph issue, see Kenneth W. Godfrey, "The Zelph Story," *BYU Studies* 29/2 (1989): 31–56.

While this example is readable and amusing, it is based on a false assumption. Nowhere did Joseph Smith claim that Zeph v killed in the final battle described in Mormon 6.

However, an even more significant example of biased and logical reasoning is the assertion by the authors that “Jesus prayed for those who would believe in him through the word of his disciples. It is not logical that he (Jesus) would let his disciples’ word [scriptures] be lost and diluted” (pp. 49–50). With one dismissive statement, the authors assume that the problem is with Mormon teachings and not with the Bible.

At no time do Farkas and Reed address the problem of the missing biblical books of *Jasher*, the *Acts of Solomon*, *Nathan*, and *Gad*, *Samuel the Seer*, and the *Acts of Uzziah*.¹⁴ Nor do they mention the *Gospel of Thomas*, *Gospel of Peter*, the *Acts of Andrew*, *Acts of Paul*, and *Acts of John*, and the *Apocalypse of Peter* from the time of the New Testament. All these books were viewed as sacred by early Christians but were rejected by Eusebius in the standardization of the scriptures at Constantine’s command in the fourth century.¹⁵

Just as troubling is the authors’ apparently illogical analysis when comparing Mormon scriptural experiences with biblical experiences. Although the authors question how King Limhi’s people could have escaped into the wilderness without the Lamanites being able to follow their tracks (Mosiah 22:10–2, 16), they do not question the unexplained biblical miracle of the Egyptians giving up their chase after the Red Sea incident (Exodus 14:21–30), even despite the access to boats to cross the sea for the rest of the army. Neither do they question the scientific improbability of Joshua’s having the sun stand still, or the children of Israel’s shouting to cause the walls of Jericho to fall down (Joshua 10:13; 6:20).

Obviously, an important aspect to believing that these incidents really did occur in the Bible or the Book of Mormon is faith. It is a very naive and unsophisticated approach to a topic to

¹⁴ For references to the mentioned lost books of the Bible, see the following: Joshua 10:13; 1 Kings 11:41; 1 Chronicles 29:29; and 2 Chronicles 26:22.

¹⁵ As cited in Reader’s Digest, “Establishing the Christian Canon,” in *The Bible through the Ages* (Pleasantville, N.Y.: Reader’s Digest, 1996), 212–5.

randomly allow credence to one unexplainable experience or concept and then to turn around and attack another for having the same level of credibility. Unfortunately, that is exactly what the authors do. Thus a large number of people not being tracked by their enemies is ridiculous whereas the sun standing still is not.

In that same light, Joseph Smith's revelation of 1832 concerning the Civil War was seen by these authors as problematic, while Jesus' prophecy on the Mount of Olives was not. Joseph Smith's prophecy in December 1832 concerning the outbreak of war starting in South Carolina is described as resting merely upon common knowledge due to the nullification controversy at the time. Which it indeed was. However, Farkas and Reed only mention in passing that the revelation was published in Liverpool, England, in 1851. That was well before the Civil War and was actually at a time of relative peace between the North and South before the war.

Also, according to the authors, the revelation did not come to pass because war was not poured out upon all nations during or after the war. Nor has there been an end to all nations (p. 171). Apparently, the authors are unaware of the fact that the Confederate States of America did indeed ask for aid from Great Britain, which seriously considered openly supporting them. Also, between 1861 and 1961 the Italian struggles for unification took place (1866-71), as did the Franco-Prussian War (1870-71); the Ashanti War in Africa (ended in 1874); the Russian-Turkish War (1877-78); the Zulu War (1879); the Chinese-Japanese War (1893-95); the Spanish-American War (1898); the Boer War (1899-1902); the Russo-Japanese War (1904-5); the Turkish-Italian War (1911); the Chinese revolution (1911); World War I (1914-18); the Spanish Civil War (1931-39); World War II (1939-45); the Korean conflict (1950-53); Israeli conflicts (1955-56); and the Cuban Revolution (1959), not to mention the numerous little revolutions, coups d'état, and border skirmishes.¹⁶

When Jesus Christ prophesied of events that would occur, he apparently spoke of a great span of time. First, he promised that

¹⁶ Bernard Grun, *The Timetables of History: A Horizontal Linkage of People and Events*, 3rd ed. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), 424-548.

Jerusalem would be “compassed with armies” and that the people would

fall by the edge of the sword, and shall be led away captive into all nations: and Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled. And there shall be signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars; and upon the earth distress of nations, with perplexity; the sea and the waves roaring; Men’s hearts failing them for fear, and for looking after those things which are coming on the earth: for the powers of heaven shall be shaken. And then shall they see the Son of man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. (Luke 21:24–27)

Even to the novice Bible student, it is obvious that the destruction of Jerusalem and subsequent scattering of the Jews occurred around A.D. 70. Even more obvious is the fact that not only has the Savior not come in glory, but the signs in the skies have not appeared. In keeping with the authors’ faulty reasoning, the prophecy of Jesus Christ should be discarded because a part of it has not yet happened. Sadly enough, the authors apparently have forgotten that many biblical prophecies followed a format of mixing present, near future, and distant future into the same revelation.

Unfortunately, the authors appear to be so intent on their goal to undermine the doctrinal, historical, and scriptural foundation of the church that they have allowed shoddy analysis and unrestrained bias to turn their work into nothing more than a superficial anti-Mormon book.

It really is not too strong to refer to this work as an anti-Mormon book. The authors tell their readers to “contend for the faith” and to do so by reasoning and disputing with Mormons (p. 188). As already stated, the book contains a chapter on how to witness to Mormons, as well as suggestions on how people can avoid praying about the validity of the Book of Mormon (pp. 195–6). However, try as they might, the authors do not offer any new argument nor have they been able to build on the arguments of other anti-Mormon works.

A much more intelligent discussion of the nature of God can be found in T. W. P. Taylder's "The Materialism of the Mormons," and John Bowes' "Mormonism Exposed" (now almost 150 years old) offers just as good an attack against the Book of Mormon with just about as much proof as do the present authors. Regrettably, the book is not nearly as interesting reading as any of the Van Deusens' or John Benjamin Franklin's highly far-fetched but entertaining exposés.¹⁷

In other words, when it comes to the realm of anti-Mormon literature, to use a clichéd expression, there is nothing new under the sun. This is certainly the case with *Mormonism: Changes, Contradictions, and Errors*. The authors have failed in their attempt to produce a scholarly work concerning the so-called problems of Mormonism. Indeed, they have even failed to produce an interesting anti-Mormon work.

¹⁷ T. W. P. Taylder, "The Materialism of the Mormons, or Latter Day Saints, Examined and Exposed" (Woolwich: Jones, 1849) and John Bowes, "Mormonism Exposed, in its Swindling and Licentious Abominations, Refuted in Its Principles, and in the Claims of Its Head, The Modern Mohammed, Joseph Smith, Who Is Proved to Have Been a Deceiver, and No Prophet of God" (London: Ward, 1850?). For an excellent rebuttal to Taylder's arguments, see Orson Pratt's "Absurdities of Immaterialism.—Or, a Reply to T. W. P. Taylder's Pamphlet, Entitled, 'The Materialism of the Mormons or Latter-Day Saints, Examined and Exposed,'" *The Latter-Day Saints' Millennial Star* 11/11–20 (1 June–15 October 1849): 161–307. The pamphlets written by Increase and Maria Van Deusen focused on sensationalized accounts of the temple ceremony. John Benjamin Franklin's pamphlets, one of which is "The Mysteries and the Crimes of Mormonism; or, A Voice from the Utah Pandemonium" (London: Elliot, 1860?), give an even more sensationalized and somewhat ribald description of the temple ceremony, as well as of plural marriage.