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Kerry A. Shirts

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Author(s) Kerry A. Shirts

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Abstract Review of “Terminology” (1998), by Jerald and Sandra
Tanner.

TERMINATING SOME TERMINOLOGY PROBLEMS BETWEEN EVANGELICAL CHRISTIANS AND MORMON CHRISTIANS

Kerry A. Shirts

The *Counterfeit Gospel of Mormonism* gives Jerald and Sandra Tanner's chapter single billing in the preface: "The chapter on Terminology Differences stands on its own. Mormons use Bible words but employ their own dictionary to define them. . . . [This chapter] will unlock the door of 'Mormonese' and help the beginner to understand the 'great divide' between Mormons and biblically based Christians" (p. 5). The Tanners emphasize this point: the chapter will not simply explain differences but "demonstrate that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is indeed teaching a different god and a counterfeit gospel" (p. 187). These are big promises. *The Counterfeit Gospel* claims to be something of a rebuttal to *How Wide the Divide?* (see p. 6),¹ but one of the things the Tanners also seem to want to rebut is caution. Robinson and Blomberg, with doctorates in religion² and many years in their respective religious communities, both made very careful disclaimers about their abilities to

1. Craig L. Blomberg and Stephen E. Robinson, *How Wide the Divide? A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1997).

2. *Ibid.*, 12.

Review of Jerald and Sandra Tanner. "Terminology." In *The Counterfeit Gospel of Mormonism*, 185–231. Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House, 1998. \$10.99.

accurately represent the views of all members of their religions.³ Neither of them attempted to claim even good understanding of the other's territory without the help of the other.⁴ The Tanners, however, seem to think they can single-handedly represent all evangelicals and all Mormons with equal accuracy. I cannot speak for evangelicals. But (to some degree) I can check the Tanners' accuracy in speaking for Latter-day Saints.

The Tanners begin their chapter by agreeing with Stephen E. Robinson that differences in terminology do indeed exist between Mormons and evangelicals (see p. 185). They never quote or mention the book again, although, as I have demonstrated above, one of the stated purposes of *The Counterfeit Gospel* is to rebut *How Wide the Divide?* I am sure that the Tanners read all of Blomberg and Robinson's book, and I am sure that in their chapter on terminology they in some way disagree with Robinson and perhaps with Blomberg, but the Tanners' readers cannot know to what they take exception without reading *How Wide the Divide?* themselves. So in this respect perhaps we ought to thank the Tanners: by their omission, they give any intelligent reader an opportunity to look at a balanced view of the Mormon-evangelical debate.

Because the Tanners did not respond directly to *How Wide the Divide?* I do not know how much they intended their chapter to be a response. I will, however, use the book in my review of *The Counterfeit Gospel*, since they at least imply criticism of it. Further, because they use the Infobases CD-ROM as a resource, I assume that anything on the CD-ROM is fair game even if they have not used it—they had access to the information. In the interest of good scholarship, however, I will quote the original sources, not the CD-ROM. Due to space constraints, I will limit my comments to three of the terms they discuss.

3. Ibid., 14, 27.

4. Ibid., 12, 22.

The Garden of Eden

The Tanners use the Garden of Eden as an example of how Mormons and "Christians" (i.e., evangelicals) do not refer to the same notion. At first glance, the example makes sense: the Tanners point out that "Christians" believe the garden to have been by the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers (which flow through modern-day Turkey, Syria, and Iraq) and Mormons believe Eden to have been in Missouri. The Tanners even quote John A. Widtsoe on the matter: "Latter-day Saints know, through modern revelation, that the Garden of Eden was on the North American continent" (p. 186). The above statements are straightforward and true. The Tanners' point, however, is to prove the LDS view unbiblical: "[Eden in Missouri] would throw off the entire first part of Genesis" (pp. 185–86).

But, according to modern scholarship, the book of Genesis cannot be "thrown off" because it does not give any explanation of where Eden would be on today's map. Widtsoe explains this problem in the same work from which the Tanners cite him. He first quotes Genesis 2:10–14, which describes the rivers and lands by Eden, and then observes:

Despite the apparently specific descriptions given, this clue has not led to the location of the Garden of Eden. Careful scholars have not been able to identify any of the four rivers with certainty. None of the rivers mentioned fits into the lands now known. Since the historically well-known names of Euphrates, Assyria, and Ethiopia do not fit into the use of them in the Garden of Eden story, it is more than probable that they are ancient names variously applied in later times. Clearly, these rivers and countries belong to early ages of the world's history, and do not apply to present-day terminology.⁵

5. John A. Widtsoe, *Evidences and Reconciliations*, arranged by G. Homer Durham (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1987), 394–95.

Hugh Nibley names A. Herrmann as one of those scholars who are looking for Eden. Herrmann believes the geography described in Genesis to be among the oldest parts of the book and that those parts come from an “ur-Genesis” that was originally written by Abraham. Nibley explains Herrmann’s position further:

The largest surviving pieces of this lost Book of Abraham are to be found in the Book of Jubilees, according to Herrmann, which, interestingly enough, is of all questioned Apocrypha the one most thoroughly vindicated by the finding of the Scrolls, which show Jubilees to be not a medieval but a genuinely ancient document. According to this source, the entire human race was living in the Land of Eden (*not* the Garden of Eden, but the land where it had been) when they were overwhelmed by water. This cannot have taken place in Mesopotamia or Egypt, Herrmann observes, since both those lands are described in the sources as being uninhabited in Noah’s day, and Kraeling has noted that according to other sources the people in the ark did not have the vaguest idea where they were after the flood, but being in strange surroundings had to learn of their location by revelation. So Herrmann seeks the Land of Eden in Abyssinia, South Arabia, and the headwaters of the Nile—all dubious locales and all far from the conventional Babylonian sites. It is a quest that would have struck the dogmatic scholars of past years with amazement: they *knew* where the Garden of Eden was.⁶

By the Tanners’ criterion, Herrmann is also unbiblical, as are all other biblical scholars who feel reasonably sure that the Garden of Eden is not by the Tigris and Euphrates.

The Tanners use the Garden of Eden to reason that “a Christian should never take for granted that his LDS friend understands common Christian terms in the biblical way” (p. 186). It is true that Latter-day Saints assign a nontraditional location to the garden.

6. Hugh W. Nibley, *The Prophetic Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1989), 108.

However, as modern scholarship shows, the traditional location cannot be considered any more or less biblical than Missouri. Before even giving their first definition, the Tanners strangle themselves with the rope they intend to use on the Latter-day Saints. Further, there are surely more important elements of the Eden story than location, and Latter-day Saints share these basics with other Christians. Mormons always associate Adam and Eve, the serpent, the flaming sword, the cherubim, and the fall of Adam with the Garden of Eden.⁷

God in the Bible

The first term the Tanners attempt to define is *Godhead*. As with the Garden of Eden, much of what the Tanners say about LDS beliefs on this subject is not offensive. They explain that Latter-day Saints believe the Godhead to be composed of three separate individuals, two of which have bodies, and for support they quote Doctrine and Covenants 130:22. They also point out that "the Mormons teach that the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are one in purpose, not one in essence" (p. 187).

These statements are true, and in fact the Tanners are right in pointing them out as major points of departure from traditional Christianity. Other Christians believe that the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are immaterial and of one essence. And again, the Tanners are to some degree right that our claims are extrabiblical. We base the separateness and the materiality of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost on Doctrine and Covenants 130:22 and on Joseph Smith's first vision.

However, the real thrust of the Tanners' argument is on the question of who God was before he was God. They say, "Preceding these three Gods [Father, Son, and Holy Ghost] there would be a countless number of Gods who rule other worlds. Each of these Gods was at one time a mortal on some other world. As resurrected, exalted beings each God and his wife procreated the spirits for their earth" (p. 187).

7. Consider, for instance, *Masterful Discourses and Writings of Orson Pratt*, compiled by N. B. Lundwall (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1981), 504–5, and Bruce R. McConkie, *A New Witness for the Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 47–48, 85–87.

The Tanners follow these statements with quotations from Joseph Smith, B. H. Roberts, Brigham Young, and James E. Talmage.

Most other Latter-day Saints (myself included) would not dare to make quite the story of how God came to be God as the Tanners have. Although we do accept the basic principle contained in these quotes—that God was once as we were—anything beyond that idea is pure speculation. In fact, as the Tanners must be aware, Robinson points out in *How Wide the Divide?* that this doctrine is only quasi-official.⁸ It has never been formally canonized. The statements the Tanners use are by and large from the nineteenth century, and the modern prophets and apostles have never given official revelation on the topic. Latter-day Saints accept the idea that God was once human as true, but it is much more a mystery than the Tanners' very explicit description indicates. As Latter-day Saints, we would not presume to know as much about God's past as they claim to understand of us.

Nevertheless, the Tanners are right in saying that this doctrine is not found in the Bible. It is not explicitly stated, although some scriptures hint at it: in John, the Jews accuse Christ of making himself equal to God. He responds, "Verily, verily, I say into you, The Son can do nothing of himself, but what he seeth the Father do: for what things soever he doeth, these also doeth the Son likewise" (John 5:19). If Christ can only do what he has seen the Father do, then is it not logical that the Father must have had a mortal body at some point, just as Christ did?

Does the Tanners' claim that "the God of the Bible has eternally been God, has no superiors, was never a human before becoming deity, and is a spirit" (p. 191) hold up any better in the Bible? Or can the scriptures they use for support be read equally well from a Latter-day Saint point of view? Below is a discussion of two of the scriptures the Tanners refer to in support of their concept of God—Numbers 23:19 and John 4:24. Ironically, Blomberg also uses these verses in *How Wide the Divide?*

Numbers 23:19 says, "God is not a man, that he should lie; neither the son of man, that he should repent: hath he said, and shall he

8. See *How Wide the Divide?* 85–86.

not do it? or hath he spoken, and shall he not make it good?" The Tanners do not explain why they included this scripture, but we can deduce that they quote it in an attempt to refute the LDS notion that God was once a man.

B. H. Roberts replied to that same argument back in the early 1900s. He held a discussion, which appeared in the *Improvement Era*, with a Jesuit priest, the Reverend Cyril Van der Donckt of Pocatello, Idaho, about the LDS doctrine of God.⁹ Van der Donckt used the same scripture the Tanners and Blomberg cite. Roberts explains the LDS interpretation of Numbers 23:19 to "Mr. V.":

Mr. V. next brings as proof against God's being an exalted man, what he calls the direct statement of the Bible, that God is not man: "God is not a man, that he should lie; neither the son of man, that he should be changed" (Numbers 23: 19). "I am God and not man" (Psalm). These passages simply present the contrast between man as he is now, and with all his imperfections on his head, and God. . . . The contrast noted in the scriptures by Mr. V. is not between *perfected* men and God, but between very imperfect men—men who lie, and are changeable—and God; and since the Latter-day Saints do not hold that man while imperfect is God, or like God, or God like him, the argument of the gentleman, based on the passages quoted, is of no force. . . . Clearly, the contrast is one of conditions, more than of natures, and at its very highest value is the contrast between a perfected nature and one not yet perfected.¹⁰

As we have noted, Blomberg also used this scripture, and Robinson gave a reply very similar to that of B. H. Roberts, rightly pointing to the context of the scripture cited.¹¹ In this passage, Balaam has been asked by the Moabite king to curse Israel, which is making plans to invade Canaan. Balaam instead blesses Israel, and when the king,

9. See David L. Paulsen, foreword to *The Mormon Doctrine of Deity*, by B. H. Roberts (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998), xix–xx.

10. Roberts, *The Mormon Doctrine of Deity*, 92–94.

11. See *How Wide the Divide?* 89.

Balak, asks a second time for a cursing, Balaam replies with the verse cited. Obviously the verse, in context, has nothing to do with God's intrinsic being. Such concepts are, in any event, entirely foreign to the Bible, and there is no evidence whatever that they circulated in the ancient Hebrew culture from which the Bible emerged. It only has to do with the moral difference, or the vast difference in constancy, between God as he is now and his imperfect and immature mortal children, a difference Latter-day Saints heartily agree with.

As was true with their argument about the Garden of Eden, one cannot necessarily prove from the Bible that God was once a man; on the other hand, the Tanners cannot prove that he has never been one. Once again, their belief, based on the scripture they have cited, is neither more nor less biblical than that of Latter-day Saints.

This same problem holds true for the scripture they cite in order to "prove" that God the Father is a spirit. Likewise, they do not contextualize Christ's statement; they simply use it as if it were self-evident: "God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24). And one cannot blame them for doing so. The scripture looks self-evident, and so seems to support their thesis that "God . . . is a spirit" (p. 191). Many a high school seminary student or missionary has used the scriptures in the same way.

However, a closer examination of the statement reveals some flaws in the Tanners' use of it, and, oddly enough, it is Blomberg, in his defense of the evangelical view, who provides us with the information that can be used to question both his and the Tanners' view: "God's immateriality and invisibility we deduce from numerous texts. John 4:24 declares 'God is spirit,' which by itself does not prove that God might not have a 'spiritual body.' But *in context* Jesus is pointing out the irrelevance of the debate that existed between Jews and Samaritans over where to worship God—in Jerusalem or on Mount Gerizim."¹²

Blomberg first gives the correct translation of the Greek, omitting the indefinite article. The Tanners' argument (assuming here that by saying "God is a spirit" the Tanners are referring to his immateriality) is weak because, as Blomberg points out, the scripture does

12. Ibid., 97.

not say he doesn't have at least a spiritual body. Thus Blomberg calls on the context to prove his point: "Jesus' point is that God is everywhere, and so it does not matter where we worship him."¹³ But Jesus does not say "God is everywhere." Christ simply says we must worship God "in spirit and in truth." Is Blomberg's interpretation unbiblical? Not necessarily, but it is an interpretation. So would it be unbiblical to interpret the scripture the "Mormon way"?

With Blomberg, Latter-day Saints also insist that John 4:24 ought to be read correctly and in context because Christ is not making a pronouncement about the nature of God. He is explaining to the Samaritan woman that the worship of God has to do with inward processes—spirit (whatever that means) and truth. So does the scripture contradict the Latter-day Saint belief that God has a body? No. Is this an interpretation? Absolutely. Once again, the Tanners have not proven their point. This scripture can be and is interpreted in various ways. To use it to prove that God is immaterial is no more unbiblical than to take the anthropomorphisms in the Old Testament literally to prove that God has a body.

Mother in Heaven

The last term I wish to address is *Mother in Heaven*. I choose this term because the Tanners really can say, in perfect truth, "There is nothing in the Bible to indicate that God has a wife" (p. 196). All the LDS sources that the Tanners quote come from the twentieth century; in fact, I will add one more that they could have used but did not. President Gordon B. Hinckley addressed this topic in the fall of 1991 at the general women's conference:

It was Eliza R. Snow who wrote the words: "Truth is reason; truth eternal / Tells me I've a mother there." (*Hymns*, 1985, no. 292.)

It has been said that the Prophet Joseph Smith made no correction to what Sister Snow had written. Therefore, we have a Mother in Heaven. . . .

13. Ibid.

Logic and reason would certainly suggest that if we have a Father in Heaven, we have a Mother in Heaven. That doctrine rests well with me.¹⁴

But just because something isn't stated in the Bible doesn't mean that thing isn't true. The Bible does not tell us that water expands when it is frozen either. The Tanners are arguing from silence—a weak argument at best. Recently, David Van Biema wrote about Moses in *Time*. Archaeological evidence is completely lacking on Moses; the world so far has no confirmation that Moses ever existed other than as a story in an ancient text. Van Biema quotes archaeologist and author James Hoffmeier on this troubling lack of evidence: “There is one important thing to remember. The absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.”¹⁵

Consider also what Adolf Holl, a biblical scholar, has said on this issue:

To draw conclusions from silence is a method that historians rightly reject. . . . We have nothing to go by but silence and conjecture, and we know well enough that in the absence of reliable information a supposition in whatever direction can never harden into truth.¹⁶

The only way to know whether or not God has a wife would be for God himself to tell us. It goes beyond the Bible to believe in a Mother in Heaven. But a lack of evidence does not mean that person has not existed, as in the case of Moses, or does not exist, as in the case of a Heavenly Mother. One day the Tanners will no longer be alive. If we were able to destroy all evidence of their existence, including their writings, would that mean they had not lived on this earth and written against the Mormons?

14. Gordon B. Hinckley, “Daughters of God,” *Ensign*, November 1991, 100.

15. David Van Biema, “In Search of Moses,” *Time*, 14 December 1998, 82.

16. Adolf Holl, *Jesus in Bad Company*, trans. Simon King (London: Collins, 1972), 11. It also might be helpful to consult my article, “The Archaeology of God: Scholarship, History, Myths and Legends,” in the *First Annual Mormon Apologetics Symposium, June 17–19, 1999* (Felton, Calif.: Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research, 1999),

The Tanners try to define many more Latter-day Saint terms, but I chose these three because they represent problems that are general to this chapter in *The Counterfeit Gospel* and, indeed, problems that are endemic to anti-Mormon writing in general.

In the first example, the Bible gives a very specific description of the location of the Garden of Eden. The first response, the one that the Tanners and countless others have used, has been to assume a modern setting for the lands described in scripture. Biblical scholars long ago discovered that they had to question their first responses; in fact, they have had to discard many of the traditional assumptions made about the Bible in light of current knowledge. In *The Counterfeit Gospel*, at least, the Tanners' arguments are flawed because, in their haste to prove Mormons wrong, they do not look at the current state of biblical scholarship and they do not question their own assumptions.

In the second example, the Bible could be interpreted either way, as biblical scholar John P. Meier explains: "the evidence available allows for no firm decision one way or the other."¹⁷ The Tanners either do not accept or do not know that any person who approaches the Bible must interpret it. As we have seen, even what seems to be the most self-evident statement (God is a spirit) can be questioned. When the Bible says that God talked to Moses face to face, Latter-day Saints take that statement literally, while evangelicals take it figuratively. Proving anything in the Bible is almost impossible, and historical Christianity itself is a witness to the many interpretations people can apply to the same text. The Latter-day Saints, recognizing this fact, use the law of witnesses to support their interpretations—they rely on other ancient texts and on modern revelation to help them

67–135, wherein I discuss, among other things, the ancient Near Eastern archaeology of the Hebrew Mother Goddess figure. See also Daniel C. Peterson, "Nephi and His Asherah: A Note on 1 Nephi 11:8–23," in *Mormons, Scripture, and the Ancient World: Studies in Honor of John L. Sorenson*, ed. Davis Bitton (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1998), 191–243.

17. John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 2:42. See my article and review of James R. Spencer, "Have You Witnessed to a Mormon Lately?" *Journal of Mormon Apologetics* 1 (1999): 80–114.

understand the truths of the Bible. Although evangelicals do not accept these witnesses, the Tanners could have at least relied on the writings of the early church fathers, as Blomberg has done, or entered a discussion with Mormons about the validity of personal revelation. To debate the acceptability of the fathers as witnesses or the need for revelation would be a more accurate and honest attempt at finding the truth than simply listing a set of scriptures out of context without consideration of the possibility of multiple interpretations.

In the third example, the Bible is silent on the existence of a Mother in Heaven—but silence, as is well recognized throughout any honest scholarly community, cannot prove or disprove anything. The scriptures the Tanners list prove only that, in some sense, God is one God—something with which Mormons do agree.

The methodology the Tanners use to make their case is very simple. They define a religious term as it is used by Latter-day Saints and quote LDS authors to support their case. They then define the term evangelically and give biblical passages to support their ideas. Anyone unfamiliar with scholarly writing will feel this chapter is authoritative both because it has numerous quotations and because it seems easy to follow.

However, anyone who has been taught to write a persuasive paper (and almost everyone who has been to high school has) will notice a major problem with this method: never once do the Tanners bring up those quotations or biblical passages that may in some way bring their definitions into question. To truly make their case, the Tanners would have to look at how the Latter-day Saints use the Bible and what arguments they use to support their interpretation. The Tanners select quotations from certain, perhaps disaffected, Latter-day Saint authors, but they never address the responses that other Latter-day Saints have made to the anti-Mormon material.

I have briefly discussed the problem of arguing from silence. The Tanners take that tactic one step further: they silence the voices that would cast doubt on their case and use that silence as a way to seem authoritative.