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Russell C. McGregor

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Author(s) Russell C. McGregor

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Abstract Review of *The Mormon Defenders: How Latter-day Saint Apologists Misinterpret the Bible* (2001), by James Patrick Holding.

THE ANTI-MORMON ATTACKERS

Russell C. McGregor

The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun. (Ecclesiastes 1:9)

Years ago and long before *recycling* was a word most people would recognize, Hugh W. Nibley likened the anti-Mormon enterprise to selling old clothes from a shiny new pushcart. Thus, while the Bible tells us there is “no new thing under the sun,” certainly some new twists in some of the old approaches turn up. The back cover of *The Mormon Defenders: How Latter-day Saint Apologists Misinterpret the Bible* features the following recommendation:

As a former fifth-generation member of the LDS Church, I enthusiastically recommend *The Mormon Defenders* as an able, insightful, and engaging defense of truly biblical Christianity.
—Kevin James Bywater

It comes as a mild surprise to find that Mr. Bywater has written the foreword from which this statement has been excerpted (p. 6). It seems unusual to me for a book’s recommendation to be quoted directly from the book itself.

Review of James Patrick Holding. *The Mormon Defenders: How Latter-day Saint Apologists Misinterpret the Bible*. Self-published, 2001. 160 pp. \$8.99.

A further self-recommendation is found in the author's introduction, which is titled, "Aggressive Apologetics: The Growing Mormon Mission." "Holding"¹ takes up the theme introduced by Mosser and Owen's essay on the need for better quality evangelical apologetics² and promises to deliver the goods in the form of "top-notch Biblical scholarship" (p. 10). This level of self-certification makes no concessions to false modesty. Whatever the actual quality of the scholarship here, the author certainly thinks it is formidable.

This book is, in part, another response to Blomberg and Robinson's *How Wide the Divide?*³—a book that seemingly continues to disturb those who have trouble accepting the proposition that individuals can believe differently and still be Christians. Holding attempts to widen the divide by attacking on seven fronts: divine embodiment, trinitarianism, premortal existence, baptism for the dead, vicarious ordinances in general, the role of works in salvation, and exaltation. Part of Holding's shiny new pushcart is found in the manner of presentation. The book has a distinct apologetic handbook feel, with the key points being reiterated in summary form at the end of each chapter. This provides the reader with a useful way to survey quickly what Holding thinks he has proven in those chapters.

In the foreword, Bywater claims that the book makes it clear that "Mormonism is not biblical" (p. 6). What neither he nor Holding spells out is what they mean by "biblical." The hermeneutic approach appears to shift as the author moves from subject to subject; the only overriding principle appears to be a search for whatever readings provide the most useful argument against Latter-day Saint beliefs

1. I have reason to believe that James Patrick Holding is a pseudonym for Robert Turkel.

2. See Carl Mosser and Paul Owen, "Mormon Scholarship, Apologetics, and Evangelical Neglect: Losing the Battle and Not Knowing It?" *Trinity Journal*, n.s., 19/2 (1998): 179–205.

3. Craig L. Blomberg and Stephen E. Robinson, *How Wide the Divide? A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1997). While both evangelicals and Latter-day Saints can and do take issue with some of the book's contents, the continuing dismay in anti-Mormon circles seems to arise from the mere fact of the book's existence.

and truth claims. Thus, in his attempt to support the nonscriptural notion of an ontological trinity, he builds up what he calls an “interpretive template” based on a mixture of canonical, deuterocanonical, and noncanonical Wisdom literature (pp. 36–40), which he then uses to control the biblical passages he chooses to examine. Then, having relied on these sources to teach Latter-day Saints how to read the Bible, he subsequently chides Latter-day Saint apologists for citing the same sources.

Holding then shifts his ground when dealing with the subject of baptism for the dead. Here the author frankly rejects what he admits is the “majority view” of 1 Corinthians 15:29 (namely, that it describes a proxy baptism on behalf of the unbaptized dead) by appealing to an argument from silence and to pagan customs—in other words, he bases his argument entirely on nonbiblical grounds. In place of this view, Holding asserts the following:

Therefore, we argue that the majority interpretation of 1 Corinthians 15:29 is off the mark. A more reasonable thesis is that the practice was devoid of theological meaning and thus not requiring Paul’s explicit condemnation, or else, that we are misunderstanding the passage completely. (p. 70)

Either the passage doesn’t mean anything, or we don’t understand it—but whatever the case, its meaning must be sacrificed. *What* isn’t biblical?

In contrast to this approach, Holding becomes a staunch and loyal enthusiast for majority opinion or scholarship as soon as it suits his purposes. In response to the great commission in Mark 16:15–16 (“And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned”), he argues that “the reader may be surprised to see this verse cited by LDS apologists, knowing that it is almost universally declared to be not part of the original Gospel of Mark” (p. 110). Just exactly why the fashions of scholarship should determine which passages of scripture form part of the faith of

the Latter-day Saints is not clear, but Holding does not even attempt to address the real issue regarding the authenticity and authority of that passage; the actual question has to do not with Mark's authorship but rather with whether Jesus actually made the statement. Matthew 28:19–20 would seem to suggest that he did say it or at least something very much like it.

Quite apart from these kinds of problems, Holding preempts half the discussion of the faith of Latter-day Saints as a form of biblical Christianity by repeatedly assuming that Mormon and Christian are distinct categories. Note that he does not attempt to argue this but simply assumes it. This he does frequently and consistently, as in the following examples:

- “A fundamental point of contention between Mormonism and Christianity . . .” (p. 11).

- “Perhaps the most obscure issue upon which Christians and Mormons disagree . . .” (p. 35).

- “The difference between Mormon and Christian belief on the nature . . .” (p. 51).

- “If one verse could be nominated to represent the different ways in which Mormonism and Christianity approach the Bible . . .” (p. 63).

These quotations are a sampling of an assumption that is not developed but simply reiterated throughout the book. Holding cannot claim to be ignorant of the relevant literature since he refers to it,⁴ yet he fails entirely to interact with it. Is this his idea of “top-notch scholarship”?

A detailed critique of his arguments would run to many pages and would be tedious. What is worthy of note is that the real nuts-and-bolts content of this book is substantially the same as most of the doctrinal anti-Mormon books produced by evangelical Protestants. The approach is always the same: since the Bible says what “we” (i.e., the evangelicals) think it means, and since “they” (i.e., any-

4. See, for instance, p. 29 n. 69, which refers to Stephen E. Robinson's *Are Mormons Christian?* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1991).

one else) think it means something different, it follows that “they” are not biblical. Holding has at least made an effort to justify this assumption with something resembling a structured argument, but that argument turns out, upon inspection, to be fatally flawed by its tendentiousness.

Where this book really does improve on some of those of its predecessors is in its tone. It neither bristles with hostility, as most earlier productions do, nor drips with insincere, condescending friendliness, as some of the more recent efforts do. Apart from one lapse in Bywater’s foreword, I saw none of the usual accusations of “dishonesty” that conservative Protestant anti-Mormons tend to fling at Latter-day Saints for failing to describe our own faith in terms amenable to the hostile caricatures our opponents have fashioned and prefer. His approach is businesslike and his tone scholarly. Nonetheless, his agenda is clear from the title he has chosen. For defenders do not contend against other defenders; attackers do. And since Holding’s book purports to “contend with *The Mormon Defenders*” (back cover), its single purpose appears to be to attack.

Holding also unfortunately fails to define crucial terms, such as *biblical*, *Christian*, and *Mormon*. Perhaps he felt it necessary to avoid such definitions since they might raise questions that would undermine his entire enterprise. He shifts his ground from chapter to chapter and from topic to topic as he keeps his focus on whatever angle of attack seems most profitable at the time. He relies heavily on such fallacies as the argument from silence, particularly when he insists that the many biblical accounts of divine appearances in human form do not indicate that God might not take some other form when no one is looking (pp. 15–16) or that Jesus might not simply be dissolving his body when he does not need to put in an earthly appearance (pp. 22–23). Holding thus fails to accomplish his stated task. “Top-notch biblical scholarship” from our evangelical Protestant brothers and sisters may someday be brought to bear on Latter-day Saint truth claims, but it has not been accomplished in this book.