Latter-day Saint Doctrines and the Bible

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Some years ago, while attending the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in San Francisco and hustling from one session to another, I was approached by Carl Mosser, himself an evangelical Protestant and a graduate student in biblical studies. He and his associate, Paul Owen, authored an article, “Mormon Scholarship, Apologetics, and Evangelical Neglect: Losing the Battle and Not Knowing It?” in which they detailed the woefully inadequate preparation of evangelicals to deal with Latter-day Saint issues and to respond to Latter-day Saint scholars. Mosser reiterated what he had stressed when we met at BYU some time before: that we could disagree—indeed, we would have to disagree—on a number of issues, but that we could do so with civility and respect. Reading Biblical Mormonism, I am impressed by its absence of shrillness and stridency, by its civility and respect toward other traditions—even when taking issue with their beliefs—but also by its tone of self-assurance in presenting the subject. Richard Hopkins—host of the Sunday evening radio talk

show “Religion Today” on Salt Lake City radio station KTKK—is the author of Biblical Mormonism. His book provides its readers with an introduction to the proper interpretation of scriptures, a discussion of the “Nature and Characteristics of God” from a Latter-day Saint perspective, an examination of the “Number of God” and of “God and Man,” a treatment of Latter-day Saint views on salvation (“Mormon Soteriology”), and a discussion, from biblical materials, on death, resurrection, judgment, and salvation for the dead in Latter-day Saint theology (“Mormon Eschatology”).

Hopkins wishes to argue, through a careful examination of the relevant biblical texts, that Latter-day Saint doctrines are eminently defensible from the Bible. This irenic examination of the biblical sources is a far cry from the writings of James White, whose screeds against the church mark him as a direct spiritual descendent of “Dr.” Walter Martin. A few years ago White was on a radio talk show with two of my friends, who asked him how he knew that the Bible is true and normative. This question White was utterly unable to answer. But the difficulty is that the intent of someone like White is not to understand but to score points against potential opponents. That evening’s encounter on the radio also raised the (for Protestants) insuperable problem of authority in religious matters. The question of authority is the key unresolved—and unresolvable—difficulty for Protestants and, in the Western Christian tradition, the key strength for Latter-day Saints and for Roman Catholics, both of whom accept particular individuals as continuing sources of authority. (This reminds me of the story related by the late Elder LeGrand Richards, who said that a Catholic acquaintance once told him, “You Mormons are all ignoramuses. You don’t even know the strength of your own position. . . . If we are right, you are wrong; if you are right, we are wrong; and that’s all there is to it. The Protestants haven’t a leg to stand on.”) ²

Biblical Mormonism’s introduction to the proper interpretation of scriptures contains an excellent set of “Some Rules of Biblical HER-

meneutics," which were borrowed from a Protestant handbook of "biblical hermeneutics," thus enabling the Latter-day Saint reader to engage in discussions with non–Latter-day Saints using the very set of rules that Protestants themselves wrote. These principles include "rules for the interpretation of sentences," "rules by which the meanings of words shall be ascertained," "rules for the interpretation of figurative language," "rules for interpretation of rare words," "interpreting scripture as a whole," "interpreting the Old Testament in light of the New," and "interpreting the scriptures." In his discussion of "exegesis" (interpretation of the text of the Bible), Hopkins helps Latter-day Saints to understand that a simple translation may mask difficulties that a reading of the original would have clarified. For example, the late Keith Marston, in his Missionary Pal: Reference Guide for Missionaries and Teachers, cites a possible textual contradiction in the story of Saul's vision on the road to Damascus between Acts 9:7, where the King James Version states, "And the men which journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice, but seeing no man," and Acts 22:9, where we read, "And they that were with me saw indeed the light, and were afraid; but they heard not the voice of him that spake to me." However, the meanings of the Greek words for "hear" in these two passages are different: while the Greek word *akouontes* (plus genitive object) in Acts 9:7 means simply "to hear," the phrase in Acts 22:9 *ouk ekousan* (plus accusative object) means "to hear with comprehension." Thus, while Paul's companions saw a light and heard a voice while with him on the road to Damascus, they were not able to understand that voice (p. 33).

*Biblical Mormonism* contains a good discussion of salvation by grace (pp. 139–64). Hopkins observes that "justification" and "sanctification" come through a combination of faith and "a system of righteous works" (p. 143). It is astonishing that, though fundamentalists and evangelicals do not in fact claim that "grace" is achieved by faith alone, they act as though it is. It is also remarkable that fundamentalists and evangelicals do not treat believing and faith as though they were an act, although many other reasonable individuals do. I am reminded of the paradoxical situation of an individual who became a
“born-again” Baptist in 1959 (thus entitling himself to irresistible grace), then joined the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints about twenty years later, thereby “canceling” the promised, presumably irresistible grace and salvation for himself. Reading Biblical Mormonism gives us a great opportunity to understand just how defendable the relation of faith and works is to salvation.

Occasionally Hopkins nods off in his discussion. For instance, he uses the phrase genitive tense rather than the more correct genitive case (p. 35). Still, Hopkins’s careful analysis and lucid exposition more than repay a thoughtful reading of the book.

Biblical Mormonism is a model study of the plan of salvation based on a careful examination of the biblical texts. It shows how defendable Latter-day Saint doctrines are when properly elucidated and interpreted. In any literary or textual study truth cannot be “proven” solely on the basis of the text itself: probabilities have to be weighed against each other, the most compelling instances ranked higher than others. Austin Farrer’s observations on rational argument in religious discussion show how important a contribution the principles of rational argumentation presented in Biblical Mormonism make to the elucidation and defense of Latter-day Saint teachings from the text of the Bible: “Though argument does not create conviction, the lack of it destroys belief. What seems to be proved may not be embraced; but what no one shows the ability to defend is quickly abandoned. Rational argument does not create belief, but it maintains a climate in which belief may flourish.”