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*The Word of God: Essays on Mormon Scripture* Dan Vogel, ed.

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## Book Reviews

DAN VOGEL, ed. *The Word of God: Essays on Mormon Scripture*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990. ix; 271 pp. \$11.95, paperback.

Reviewed by Steven Epperson, a curator at the Museum of Church History and Art. Epperson has degrees from Brown University, Divinity School of the University of Chicago, and Temple University. He is also a former fellow of the Shalom Hartman Institute for Advanced Judaic Thought in Jerusalem.

This recent imprint by Signature Books contains fifteen essays which critically examine aspects of the standard works of the LDS and RLDS scriptural canon. Each author has paid attention to the cultural and environmental setting for the creation of the “written word of God.” In the words of the editor, the essayists are convinced that “the essential requirement for interpretation for a text is to read it in context” because “the written word of God does not come to us direct but through human intermediaries” (viii). Therefore, each essay employs or exhorts the use of scholarly, historical-critical tools to illuminate “the problem of the human and the divine in scripture” (ix). These convictions accord well with the collection’s explicit program: to “challenge . . . simplistic assumptions about the nature of revelation” in order to arrive at a “more refined . . . definition of revelation and scripture” (ix).

This program of confrontation and refinement fails to succeed fully, however, due to numerous difficulties in the use of historical and literary tools and sources in reasoning and theology. In addition, two principal assumptions woven throughout *The Word of God*—that LDS and RLDS are scriptural literalists and that Joseph Smith was the author of the latter-day scriptural canon—are not well served by the collection’s shortcomings (to be discussed below).

Nevertheless, *The Word of God* has its achievements and insights. In particular, James Lancaster’s and Kevin Barney’s essays stand out in this collection that favors the concise examination of a particular text or event. Both essays encourage the reader to sympathetically encounter either eyewitness reports of the media and settings for the Book of Mormon translation (Lancaster) or the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible as a

midrash, or commentary, rather than a “literal restoration” (157) of lost original manuscripts (Barney).

Another important contribution, made by Melodie Moench Charles and others, underlines those tendentious interpretations of the Hebrew Bible made by modern Latter-day Saint exegetes that simultaneously wrest sacred writ from its historical and cultural moorings, lay claim to exclusive and univocally correct readings of those texts, and thus produce an incomplete and fragmented interpretation of those texts. Finally, by pursuing a contextual mode of interpretation, the reader comes away, for example in Lester Bush’s article on the Word of Wisdom, with a better understanding, if not of the sacred text and its author, then at least of the spatial, temporal, and ideational terrain wherein the text appeared. But here the problems begin.

### HISTORICAL-CRITICAL METHOD AND LOGIC

The contextual terrain of scripture may be sketched in and accounted for by historical inquiry to an astonishing degree, and still one may misinterpret the text. For example, Doctrine and Covenants 89 has not been dealt with (*pace* Bush) in its *sensus plenior*, “the plenitudinous sense of the entire text,” when it is reduced to a code of health. In Bush’s essay, an unnecessary level of background noise (i.e., early nineteenth-century American medical culture) has been dialed in at the expense of the internal relations of the text. This fact is evident by the essay’s silence regarding the section’s opening and closing sets of verses, the verses that constitute the very prerequisite for a more compelling interpretation of the text.

A majority of the writers of *The Word of God* have invested an unwarranted degree of confidence in the ability of the *sitz-im-leben*, the “life world,” of the production of scripture, re-created by the historical-critical method, to enable a person to adequately and sufficiently read the text. Edward Ashment’s assertion that historical methodology “*faithfully* portrays and interprets religious phenomena in their original setting” and “*seeks to develop safeguards against imposing modern categories on ancient data*” (251; italics added)<sup>1</sup> invests the tentative findings of scholarly historical research with a burden of certitude his assertion cannot bear.

This unguarded enthusiasm for the historical-critical method leads numerous essayists to commit fallacies of *genetic* (or environmental) and *post hoc ergo propter hoc* reasoning. Citations of Unitarian controversies, deistic cosmologies, Quetzalcoatl, the Creed of Chalcedon, and the Protestant work ethic may provide for

some readers an imposing body of circumstantial evidence to account for the environmental derivation of Latter-day Saint scripture. But for the critical student, the arguments are not persuasive, considering the lack of more concrete linkage and the eminent possibility that a text “stands apart from its genesis”<sup>2</sup> and contains its own meaning. Nor is the attentive reader swayed by post-hoc argumentation from temporal sequence to causal relations (if *b* follows *a*, *a* is the cause of *b*); such logic appears to be a shortcut in reasoning that we, as a scholarly community, are in too much haste to commit. Just find an assumed temporal sequence—for example, a fourth-century ecumenical confession or eighteenth-century Christological formulation preceding Abinadi, Amulek, and Ether—and Voilà! We’ve discovered the causal source for yet one more Book of Mormon passage and added one more testimony to Joseph Smith’s eclectic authorial genius.

The most egregious example of these fallacies is found in Susan Curtis’s essay, wherein she contends, among other things, that “exemplary characters in Smith’s Book of Mormon were fundamentally market capitalists” driven by “assumptions about hard work, regularity, commerce, and accumulation sustained by a Victorian sensibility” (Curtis, 87). This assertion would be incomprehensible were the reader not to extend the charity of assuming that its author had only a superficial acquaintance with the text (the reader might also suggest beginning to correct the assessment by reading 3 Nephi 6:4–14). Before closing our minds with pronouncements such as “paraphrase,” “influence,” “borrowing,” and “eclecticism,” allow us to look seriously at the complex language that is literature, at the text in its own terms, and at its internal relationships.

#### A NECESSARY DIGRESSION

“For the record,” knowledge of the scholarly tools and tentative findings of historical-critical, as well as literary-critical, scriptural inquiry is a *nonnegotiable* prerequisite for students and teachers who study scripture seriously, academically, worshipfully. It is scandalous that we Latter-day Saints do so little to familiarize students with this field of inquiry, no matter how well intentioned our motives may be. Subsequently, students, teachers, and lay people alike are left unprepared to deal thoughtfully with the methods, arguments, and propositions of scriptural scholars (and hacks) whose work dominates the academic fields and even popular literature (for example, the yearly December issues of *Time* magazine and *U. S. News and World Report*, which deal with

scriptural authorship and meanings). Our silence and our inelegant disdain only lead those entrusted to us in Sunday Schools, seminaries, and religion classes to seek out or passively receive “wisdom” from others who may be either ill-equipped in the field or unsympathetic to our most deeply felt beliefs.

Unfortunately, both the exhortation to employ historical-critical tools and their actual implementation suffer further in *The Word of God* from some authors’ inadequate familiarity with primary and secondary literature. Where arguing from historical data is so important, factual errors and superficial acquaintance with the temporal and ideational “career” of a subject undermine the persuasiveness of numerous essays. Limited space allows only a few examples.

It is difficult to respond to George D. Smith’s call to update Isaiah (113) when, contrary to his assertions, (a) the so-called Council at Jamnia (Javneh) may not only have decided nothing about the Hebrew canon, it may not have even taken place;<sup>3</sup> (b) the “Jerusalem branch of the Church” was not destroyed by the Romans in 70 A.D. (113), rather, most of the community removed to the city of Pella in 66 A.D.;<sup>4</sup> and (c) most “early Christians” were Jews and, hence, regarded marital “sexual gratification” in positive terms (even as a theurgical undertaking) and not “the work of Satan” (116).<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, it is difficult to “update Isaiah” when the essayist has not engaged in serious argument with single-author proponents of Isaiah (Christian and Jewish) because he lacks the requisite linguistic and philological tools to do so.

Similarly, the reader has difficulty accepting Edward Ashment’s unqualified contention that the P strata in Genesis is “a late account” (242). Ashment begs the question of what is “a late account,” and he doesn’t seem to be conversant with the literary/critical hypothesis that posits just the opposite: “Granted the possibility of intertextuality . . . [the] J [strata] can be better appreciated by supposing a prevenient text, or body of texts”; P and/or E may have been “available *as text* to a midrashically imaginative revisionist [J].”<sup>6</sup>

Ashment’s essay, “Making the Scriptures ‘Indeed One in Our Hands,’” indicts tendentious and ill-informed Latter-day Saint scriptural interpretation. He points out the numerous difficulties of relying on the King James Version of the Bible as a textual source for scholarly, critical inquiry (and problems there are!) but fails to acknowledge that, minimally, the King James Bible “is still arguably the version that best preserves the literary effects of the original languages.”<sup>7</sup> His argument suffers, furthermore, where he asserts, without qualification, that “there is *no* biblical basis for the

Mormon doctrine of Ante-mortal Existence” (238; italics added). Ashment may want to read the text of Genesis 1:26 and then examine its extraordinary career in Jewish midrashic literature.<sup>8</sup> That literature wrestled seriously and imaginatively with the perplexing plural forms of address in the creation account, forms of address that assume a preexistent heavenly court or host. In addition, an interdisciplinary examination of the history of the Proverbs 8 text and its personification of a preexistent “Wisdom” may be similarly enlightening. The point is, there have been a number of Jews, and Christians, who felt that there was a biblical basis for positing and speculating about an antemortal existence.

Melodie Moench Charles and George A. Smith discount any belief in Judaism of substitutionary suffering (“no Jew expected his messiah to atone for anyone’s sins” [138]). This proposition is part of the argument which disengages Hebrew prophets from prescient gifts and defines prophets primarily as commentators of the contemporary scene. Setting the argument of foreknowledge aside, an example of vicarious suffering stands out in one readily available Jewish text, the martyrdom of Eleazar in 4 Maccabees 6:28–29: “Be merciful unto thy people, and let our punishment be a satisfaction in their behalf. Make my blood their purification, and take my soul to ransom their souls.”<sup>9</sup>

Dan Vogel and Brent Metcalfe’s essay, though admirably researched and written, also suffers from the “genetic” fallacy. Because they focus on external cosmological debates from the seventeenth through early nineteenth centuries, the authors unfortunately bypass what the expectant reader anticipates: a discussion of the ancient and medieval concept of cosmology as a philosophical/theological science, of cosmology’s internal rationality (which might at least have helped Vogel and Metcalfe make some sense of “fixed,” “governing,” and “subordinate” celestial bodies),<sup>10</sup> and of its eventual breakdown. Such an examination would have underlined the point that a function of the prophetic metaphysical (not literal and material, *pace* Vogel and Metcalfe) poetry of Doctrine and Covenants 88 is to reaffirm the divine source, nature, and goal of the cosmos.

In sum, the program of confronting and refining Latter-day Saint definitions of revelation and scripture pursued in *The Word of God* falls prey to the exactions of the very tools employed by its authors. On the one hand, the reader sorely misses a sense of circumspection, of measure, even of skepticism and an awareness of the tentative and provisional, that would, in more able hands, qualify dogmatic propositions about the context and interpretation of God’s word as mediated through his human agents. On the other

hand, historical scholarship expects a more profound familiarity and fluency with the history, “the career,” of a text, and of its meaning on its own terms, than is manifested in this collection.

## THEOLOGY

In view of the preceding observations, the critical reader, unfortunately, encounters numerous interpretive and theological problems in *The Word of God*. Geoffrey Spencer and William Russell’s unimaginative description of the so-called scriptural literalism of the Latter-day Saint communities renders justice neither to the human complexity of those communities nor to the distinguished history and theological accomplishments of rabbinic, patristic, medieval, and early modern scriptural commentary and analysis. It would speak well for the maturity of our scholarship and the generosity of our souls if we were to recognize that for the great practitioners of traditional biblical hermeneutics “unlocking . . . the Bible’s secret mystery was their enterprise, the very holiness of the text is what allowed them to let their imaginations roam . . . [and] to state radical or controversial ideas.”<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, imaginative and compelling accounts of revelation and of the authority of the Book of Mormon should offer us more than Spencer’s misleading commonplace that “[revelation is] an event in our history which brings rationality and wholeness” (25) (it can bring just the opposite) and Russell’s reductionist assertion that the book’s authority “stems from containing the thought of the founding prophet just prior to the organization of the church” (51). Two non-Mormon descriptions of revelation and of Joseph Smith (Avery Dulles’s *Models of Revelation*<sup>12</sup> and Harold Bloom’s *The American Religion: Analysis and Prophecy*<sup>13</sup> respectively) display welcome levels of sophistication, critical acumen, and sympathetic scholarship that are lacking in the essays at hand.

In addition, in spite of Thomas’s (73), Smith’s (122), Charles’s (135), and Ashment’s (243) assertions to the contrary, there are Christologies (plural) in the Book of Mormon and in Mormonism. One essayist after another has conflated the speculations and mythic narratives of Abinadi, Amulek, Benjamin, and Ether and made them not only equivalent in weight to the extended statements ascribed to Jesus Christ about himself, his mission, and his relationship to the Father, but also superior to Christ’s own self-proclamation. These preincarnational Christologies are not sufficient and compelling authorities to warrant the simple identification of Jesus Christ as the God of the Old Testament. In 3 Nephi, Jesus consistently portrays God the Father as the divine author and partner of Israel’s covenant: “Ye are of the

covenant which the Father made with your fathers” (3 Ne. 20:25). Jesus tells the Nephites it is the Father who rewards, knows, forgives, sees, clothes, responds, gathers, and leads. The Son defers, prays, and is subordinate to his Father, the God of Israel. This role is the doctrine and work given by the Father to the Son (3 Ne. 11:31–32).

The theological persuasiveness of the essays is weakened by mistaken assertions (*a*) that the Jewish people have somehow been provisionally unchosen as God’s covenant people (124); (*b*) that we exhaust the definition of *Redeemer* in the Hebrew Bible with the terms *kinsman*, *witness*, or *umpire* (118, 239); (*c*) that prophetic foreknowledge is, in fact, *only* “anachronistic contamination” by later redactors and readers (40); and (*d*) that the scriptures’ normative and authoritative status derives principally from their role as initiator, “a common point for the beginning” of theological discourse (60). Actually, the scriptures’ normative status is derived from far more than just an agreed beginning for discourse.

Finally, this collection furthers (unwittingly?) a tendentious, “protestant” reading of the word of God in three ways: it draws the unwarranted conclusion that Latter-day Saint scriptures teach that the Mosaic law was only “an oppressive punishment imposed by an angry God” (135); it assumes that the solely authentic meaning of the text is prior to or given within it rather than connected, as two early links, in a complex chain of the text’s career or tradition; and it asserts that the “inspiration” of a scriptural passage “must always remain purely individualistic” (212).

## CONCLUSION

In his essay, “Beyond Literalism,” William Russell makes an observation which begs a question and an answer: “Frequently the most liberal church members, while accepting biblical scholarship, nevertheless do not take it seriously” (49). Why that scholarship is not taken seriously by more Latter-day Saints is answered, in part, by the shortcomings of these essays. This reader looks to some future Signature Books imprint that will display the scholarly rigor and imaginative reading of history and theology sufficient to make a compelling case to modify the way we read the word of God.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Quoted from Howard Clark Kee, *Miracle in the Early Christian World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 1, 5.



<sup>2</sup>Northrop Frye, Sheridan Baker, and George Perkins, *The Harper Handbook to Literature* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), 207 sub “genetic fallacy.”

<sup>3</sup>See Wilfred Cantwell Smith, “Scripture as Form and Concept: Their Emergence for the Western World,” in *Rethinking Scripture: Essays from a Comparative Perspective*, ed. Miriam Levering (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 39, 53–54.

<sup>4</sup>See Hegiseppus, Eusebius, Robert M. Grant, etc.

<sup>5</sup>See David Feldman, *Marital Relations, Birth Control and Abortion in Jewish Law* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), 81–105.

<sup>6</sup>See Leslie Brisman, *The Voice of Jacob: On the Composition of Genesis* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), xiv–xv, 3.

<sup>7</sup>Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, eds., *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1987), 7.

<sup>8</sup>See Barry W. Holtz, *Back to the Sources: Reading the Classic Jewish Texts* (New York: Summit Books, 1984), 192–93; Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1946), 51–53; and Jon Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), chapter 1. For a first-rate example of historical scholarship that reconstructs the career of scriptural texts, see Jeremy Cohen, “*Be Fertile and Increase, Fill the Earth and Master It*”: *The Ancient and Medieval Career of a Biblical Text* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).

<sup>9</sup>The Fourth Book of Maccabees, in *Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 2 of *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha; with introductions and critical and explanatory notes to the several books*, ed. R. H. Charles and others (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963). Charles’s introductory remarks on 4 Maccabees point to numerous other accounts of the belief in and reflection upon vicarious atonement by messiah-like figures in biblical and postbiblical Jewish literature.

<sup>10</sup>See Vogel and Metcalfe’s puzzlement (208, 218–19 n. 78).

<sup>11</sup>Holtz, *Back to the Sources*, 189, 194.

<sup>12</sup>Avery Dulles, *Models of Revelation* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1983).

<sup>13</sup>Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: Analysis and Prophecy* (forthcoming).