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Should We Apologize for Apologetics?

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SHOULD WE APOLOGIZE FOR APOLOGETICS?

Steven T. Densley Jr.

A review of Blair G. Van Dyke & Loyd Isao Ericson, eds., *Perspectives on Mormon Theology: Apologetics*. Greg Kofford Books, 2017, 279 pages with endnotes and index. \$25.95 (paperback).

Abstract: An analysis of the history, scope, and effectiveness of Mormon apologetics is long overdue. Unfortunately, Perspectives on Mormon Theology: Apologetics falls short of providing an in-depth analysis of the field and instead provides a very limited history, very little discussion of the scope of Mormon apologetics, and little discussion of the impact of Mormon apologists on Mormon thought. Furthermore, no attempt is made to discuss how apologetics has affected the arguments of critics of Mormonism. While a few articles do approach apologetics in a positive way, the work is largely critical of the activity of defending the Church with scholarship or of providing academic research to help support the testimony of members of the Church.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is a missionary church. We often hear the motto “Every member a missionary.” As members and full-time missionaries alike share the gospel message with the world, they usually give investigators reasons to believe that our Church is true. These reasons often take the form of arguments supported by evidence, either in the form of personal experiences, scriptural references, logical analysis, or sometimes academic findings. In making these arguments in support of their faith, members of the Church engage in what is called *apologetics*.

Apologetics is not a word frequently used by members of the Church. Mormon apologists are sometimes asked by other members of the Church, “What are you apologizing for?” As of this writing, the word

apologetics appears in only four sources found at LDS.org, and none of these are general conference references. By contrast, many evangelical schools offer courses and even graduate degrees in apologetics.¹ Of course the vocabularies of Mormons and the broader Christian world differ in many ways. However, since Mormons do not often use the word *apologetics*, some, perhaps thinking that this term refers only to academic pursuits, may wonder if the leaders of the Church are opposed to the practice of scholarship-based apologetics. However, rather than opposing the use of scholarship in support of faith, the Church's website at LDS.org recently highlighted the work of the apologetic organizations FairMormon, Book of Mormon Central, and the Interpreter Foundation, listing these groups on its website as unofficial sources for reliable answers to gospel questions.²

Lay Church members are not the only parties involved in apologetics: Church leaders themselves have also long engaged in apologetics and have emphasized its important role in helping to strengthen our faith. One recent example is Elder Jeffrey R. Holland's address delivered at Brigham Young University during the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the discovery of chiasmus in the Book of Mormon.³

Elder Holland emphasized that in building a strong testimony, it is important to engage both our hearts and our heads:

Faith and testimony, gospel devotion and Church loyalty, conviction so strong it leads to covenants and consecration are ultimately matters of the Spirit. They come as a gift from God, delivered and confirmed to our soul by the Holy Ghost in His divine role as revelator, witness, teacher of truth. But it should be noted that truly rock-ribbed faith and uncompromised conviction comes with its most complete power when it engages our head as well as our heart.⁴

1. For an example of such schools, see "The Top 10 Graduate Programs in Christian Apologetics," The Best Schools, accessed August 31, 2017, <https://thebestschools.org/rankings/top-10-graduate-programs-christian-apologetics/>.

2. See "Gospel Topics, Essays, and Other Resources," The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, accessed August 31, 2017, <https://www.lds.org/si/objective/doctrinal-mastery/gospel-sources?lang=eng>.

3. Jeffrey R. Holland, "The Greatness of the Evidence" (speech, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT, August 16, 2017). <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/transcript-elder-holland-speaks-book-of-mormon-chiasmus-conference-2017>.

4. Ibid.

He also stressed the important role of evidence in supporting our faith:

I don't have to be [a lawyer] to understand in a court of law the power and primacy of evidence. In making our case for the restored gospel of Jesus Christ, I believe God intends us to find and use the evidence He has given — reasons, if you will — which affirm the truthfulness of His work.⁵

Elder Holland noted that Christ himself provided evidences, or proofs, of his resurrection. Luke introduced the Book of Acts by noting that after he rose from the grave, Christ “*shewed himself alive after his passion by many infallible proofs*, being seen of them forty days, and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God.”⁶ Elder Holland added that upon receiving evidence of the truth, “surely we are honor bound to affirm and declare that truth and may be upbraided if we do not.”⁷

He continued:

Our testimonies aren't dependent on evidence — we still need that spiritual confirmation in the heart of which we have spoken — but not to seek for and not to acknowledge intellectual, documentable support for our belief when it is available is to needlessly limit an otherwise incomparably strong theological position and deny us a unique, persuasive vocabulary in the latter-day arena of religious investigation and sectarian debate. Thus armed with so much evidence of the kind we have celebrated here tonight, we ought to be more assertive than we sometimes are in defending our testimony of truth.⁸

Elder Holland closed with the following prayer:

May our Father in Heaven bless us and an ever-larger cadre of young scholars around the Church to do more and more to discover and delineate and declare the reasons for the hope that is in us, that ... we may with bold conviction hold up to a world that desperately needs it “the greatness of the evidences which [we have] received,” especially of the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon, the keystone of our religion.⁹

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid., quoting Acts 1:1–3, emphasis added.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

Turning now to an examination of the book *Perspectives on Mormon Theology: Apologetics*, it is interesting to examine these various essays in light of Elder Holland's enthusiastic support of defending the Church with scholarship and of the exercise of using evidence to sustain and declare our beliefs.

Blair Van Dyke

The collection begins with an article by co-editor Blair G. Van Dyke that aims to provide a historical and theological backdrop for the chapters to follow. He begins by defining the word *apologetics*, which is a helpful starting point, since many Mormons are unfamiliar with the word, and even those who regularly engage in the practice of apologetics sometimes disagree on what the word means. As Van Dyke explains, the word *apologetic* comes from the Greek word *apologia* and refers to a defense by rational argument. With respect to Mormon apologetics, there are two basic types of apologetics: *positive apologetics*, which provides arguments in support of the Church; and *negative apologetics*, which provides responses to criticisms against the Church.

At this point, Van Dyke's focus turns to an explanation of the distinctions between belief that is based on evidence and belief that is not based on evidence, which are known as *fideism* and *presuppositionalism*. Given Van Dyke's extended focus on these topics, one might think that this is the central problem of Mormon apologetics: argument without evidence. However, he provides no example of an article published by any apologetic organization that responds to the critics by merely arguing that one must "just believe" (p. 7). Nor did he cite any examples from the apologetics created from among the first generation of Saints — such as Orson and Parley P. Pratt and a host of other lesser-known missionaries. He likewise makes no appeal to such an approach by later authors, such as B.H. Roberts or Hugh Nibley.

Of course one might argue, correctly, that Mormon apologists do not argue from a position of pure objectivity, since they believe the Church to be true before engaging the critics. However, one might just as well criticize Mormon studies scholars for not being objective because they hold certain facts to be true before choosing a topic, collecting the data, conducting the study, interpreting the data, or presenting the results. As I discuss further below, pure objectivity is a myth. Furthermore, anyone who takes a position and then defends it is an *apologist*. The fact that a person has chosen a position does not mean the argument itself is without merit.

A main distinction between Latter-day Saint apologists and some authors of secular religious studies is that it is often difficult to tell the perspective from which a scholar of religious studies approaches a subject. While we all have biases, apologists are more open about their biases. Also, the fact that apologists are committed to the Church does not mean they have chosen their positions without evidence. Evidence that forms the basis for commitment to the Church may come in all varieties, including personal revelation from God. However, even if one's testimony is based solely on a spiritual witness, it would not be accurate to equate such a testimony with belief without evidence. Yet this is what Van Dyke does.

Of course, it is fair enough to observe that a testimony based on an experience with the Holy Ghost does not provide an artifact that can be examined by third parties (except, perhaps, for the life of the individual him or herself). It would also be fair to observe, as Van Dyke does, that members of the Church are often told a testimony should center on personal revelation. However, it is incorrect to suggest, as Van Dyke also does, that the history of Mormon apologetics is marred by a long and dark period of anti-intellectualism when an appeal to evidence was absent in the arguments of Mormon apologists.

In what purports to be a general overview of the history of Mormon apologetics, Van Dyke focuses on the period during the late twentieth century when Church leaders became deeply concerned about certain Mormon scholars who were openly criticizing official Church positions on a variety of topics. He quotes Ezra Taft Benson who, in 1980, listed "intellectuals" as one of two groups that "have the greatest difficulty in following the prophet" (p. 13). Van Dyke argues that during this period, religious scholarship within the church languished, as did academically grounded apologetics. Ironically, it is during this period when the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) rose to ascendancy. And rather than serving as an example of the failure of Mormon apologists to produce academically reliable research, FARMS has been recognized by both evangelical and Catholic scholars as producing solid and credible scholarship.¹⁰

10. See, e.g., Paul Owen and Carl Mosser, "Mormon Scholarship, Apologetics, and Evangelical Neglect: Losing the Battle and Not Knowing It?" *Trinity Journal*, 19/2 new series (Fall 1998): 179–205, http://www.forananswer.org/Top_LDS/Evangelical_Neglect.htm; Introvigne, "The Book of Mormon Wars: A Non-Mormon Perspective," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, 5/2 (1996): 1–25, <http://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1117&context=jbms>.

Van Dyke not only fails to acknowledge the important contributions of FARMS, he also fails to discuss the work of early Mormon apologists like John Taylor or Parley P. Pratt or later ground-breaking apologists like Hugh Nibley, John Sorenson, and John W. Welch. It may be that in doing so, it would be more difficult for him to advance his thesis that Mormon apologists have frequently argued without evidence.

All but one of the examples of Mormon apologists Van Dyke cites as engaging in non-evidence-based apologetics come from statements of prophets and apostles who encourage members to seek spiritual confirmation of the truthfulness of the Church. However, encouraging people to seek after personal revelation is neither an argument against a critic nor an argument in support of the Church. Personal revelation is a way by which people can become convinced the Church is true, but revelation is an epistemology distinct from rational argument. In other words, Van Dyke criticizes Church leaders for engaging in non-evidence-based apologetics, whereas in these examples, they are not really engaging in apologetics at all.

As the final example of the institutional Church making an argument not based on evidence, Van Dyke points to the Church's opposition to gay marriage. Van Dyke notes that following the 2013 Supreme Court decision upholding gay marriage, the Church issued a statement in support of traditional marriage, "which," the Church argued, "for thousands of years has proven to be the best environment for nurturing children" (p. 19). Van Dyke claims this argument is based on presupposition rather than being an evidence-based argument. Ironically, Van Dyke may here betray a personal tendency toward presupposition on the issue of gay marriage, since there is indeed evidence that supports the statement of the Church. As a joint report from Princeton University and the left-of-center Brookings Institution observed, "Most scholars now agree that children raised by two biological parents in a stable marriage do better than children in other family forms across a wide range of outcomes."¹¹

11. Sara McLanahan and Isabel Sawhill, "Marriage and Child Wellbeing Revisited: Introducing the Issue," *The Future of Children*, Princeton-Brookings, 25/2, (2015): 4, <https://www.princeton.edu/futureofchildren/publications/docs/Full%20Journal%20Marriage%20Revisited.pdf>. See, also, Mark Regnerus, "How different are the adult children of parents who have same-sex relationships? Findings from the New Family Structures Study," *Social Science Research*, 41/4, (2012): 752–770, <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0049089X12000610>. More evidence in support of the Church's position has emerged since 2013. See, e.g., Donald Paul Sullins, "Emotional Problems Among Children with Same-Sex Parents: Difference by Definition," *British Journal of Education, Society and Behavioural Science*, 7/2

In summary, rather than providing, as promised, an overview of the history of Mormon apologetics, Van Dyke engages in a critique of methods that reject the use of reason and evidence and rely instead on presupposition, as if this were a widespread problem in Mormon apologetics. However, he provides no examples of apologists for the Church, arguing in response to rational argument, that we should simply accept these matters on faith. Rather, he quotes various prophets and apostles who emphasize the general importance of a spiritual witness in gaining a testimony of the Church. Van Dyke minimizes the value of an inner conviction based on personal experience and a spiritual witness and equates this kind of internal evidence with a conviction based on no evidence at all.

In introducing the topic of Mormon apologetics, Van Dyke seems merely to be tracking the history of Christian apologetics generally more than Mormon apologetics specifically. He seems to be arguing that the history of Mormon apologetics fits into the pattern that characterizes the history of non-Mormon apologetics. This proves to be an imperfect fit, to say the least, but it does provide the reader with a window into some of the controlling biases at work among the later authors in the anthology who disparage apologetics.

Daniel C. Peterson

Dan Peterson then provides a sort of apologetic in defense of apologetics. He acknowledges that just as there are good and bad doctors, lawyers, and scientists, there are also good and bad apologists. He also acknowledges that rational arguments can no more assure salvation than medicine can assure recovery from a sickness. Nevertheless, apologetics is necessary. Quoting Austin Farrer,

Though argument does not create conviction, 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. (p. 31)

(2015): 99–120, <http://www.sciencedomain.org/abstract/8172>. Note, too, that more recent research has called into question the scientific reliability of the conclusions cited by Van Dyke. See Loren Marks, “Same-Sex Parenting and Children’s Outcomes: A Closer Examination of the American Psychological Association’s Brief on Lesbian and Gay Parenting,” *Social Science Research*, 41/4 (2012): 735–751, <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0049089X12000580>.

Peterson points to Peter's injunction that we "be ready always to give an answer [*apologia*] to every man that asketh you for a reason for the hope that is in you" (1 Peter 3:15). Furthermore, not only the Apostles but Christ himself argued to the Jews on the basis of the miracles and fulfilled prophecy that Jesus was the Messiah (see, e.g., John 14:11; Luke 24:25–27 and Acts 2:22–32). The apostles further argued to non-Jews that nature itself was evidence that God exists (see, e.g., Acts 14:14–17; Rom. 1:18–20). Paul cited the evidence of hundreds of witnesses to the resurrection of Christ (1 Corinthians. 15:3–8) and even quoted Greek poets in support of his arguments (Acts 17:18–34). In doing so, Peterson argues that they did not show a lack of confidence in the power of the Spirit to convert people; rather, "they trusted that the Holy Ghost would work through their arguments and their evidence to convert those whose hearts were open to the Spirit" (p. 35).

After providing similar examples from the Book of Mormon, he then quotes the Lord's command to William McLellin to "bear testimony in every place, unto every people and in their synagogues, reasoning with the people" (D&C 66:7). Of course, one could read this verse to mean that reasoning with the people is part and parcel of bearing testimony. Peterson then points out that the simple act of bearing testimony can take the form of logical argument. For example: "I have felt divine love and am therefore confident that God exists."

Peterson concludes by observing that while not everyone is interested in or has the ability to engage in scholarly apologetics, all who are under covenant to "stand as witnesses of God" (Mosiah 18:9) have a duty to do apologetics in some form. Indeed, whether we like it or not, anyone who takes a position and provides a reason for taking that position is an apologist. The question is whether or not we will *choose* to give an answer to everyone who asks us a reason for the hope that is within us.

Neal Rappleye

While it would be easy to assume that apologetics functions in a way that preserves the status quo, Neal Rappleye persuasively argues that Mormon apologetics has actually expanded theological boundaries in a variety of ways. As one example, Rappleye notes that it has become popular among Mormon apologists to adopt many of the conclusions of non-Mormon scholar Margaret Barker regarding the pre-exilic Israelite religion. Barker has cast doubt on the predominant understanding of King Josiah as a righteous religious reformer, arguing that in fact, Josiah corrupted the true religion and stamped out an earlier understanding of a council of

gods consisting of a father, a mother, and a son of the father. When we consider that Lehi argued against apostasy among the people of Jerusalem in a period immediately after the reign of King Josiah, it is easy to imagine how Lehi might have been arguing against the reforms of Josiah, which caused, among other things, the people to think that there is only one God and not, as earlier understood, a council of gods. It also casts Laman and Lemuel in a new light: perhaps their attempts to kill Nephi could arguably have been justifiable, in their eyes, under Deuteronomic laws against false prophets. (See, e.g., Deuteronomy 13:1–11; 18:20.) This perspective can both expand the horizons of the traditional interpretations of scripture and can, at the same time, add credence to the argument that the Book of Mormon is an authentic historical document.

Similarly, the work of apologists who have examined geographical and cultural references in the Book of Mormon have both challenged long-held assumptions about where the events of the Book of Mormon took place and have provided insights that help readers to understand how the stories found there fit comfortably into an ancient context.

Rappleye's article provides an interesting take on apologetics. Indeed, it would have been interesting to expand on what he has written with an additional article that explores further how the work of those defending the Church has contributed to changes not only in the way Mormons understand scriptural doctrine and history, but also how the work of those defending the Church may have affected policies and practices within the Church.

Michael Ash

As one who has been on the front lines of modern Mormon apologetics, Michael Ash is well positioned to comment on the ways in which the endeavor has been executed, for better and for worse, on the Internet. He notes a great deal of confusion among Mormons over what apologetics actually is and whether it is a useful undertaking. Much of this is due, contends Ash, to the fact that on Internet message boards, a wide variety of methods may be used, and those involved have varied levels of expertise and professional demeanor. It can become easy to paint all Mormon apologetics with a broad brush based on a limited number of on-line experiences. If those experiences are with individuals who are not careful in their methods and intemperate in their approaches, the entire enterprise may receive a black eye.

Nevertheless, even when apologetics is at its best, there are those, even within the ranks of Mormon academia, who doubt the efficacy of

apologetics or even contend that it is harmful. These critics often claim that apologetics is not “real scholarship” because apologists do not take an objective approach to the evidence. Since apologists believe the Church is true, these critics explain, apologists cannot simply follow the facts wherever they may lead.

In response to this criticism, Ash turns to psychological and neurological research demonstrating that, apologist or not, we all have biases and prejudices, many of which we do not even recognize. Further, although the term *apologetics* often refers to the defense of a religious position, whenever a scholar takes a position and defends it, the scholar engages in apologetics. Secular scholars themselves do not wander about aimlessly doing research. Even in the most noncontroversial of fields, in merely choosing a hypothesis to study, a scholar takes a position and thereby exhibits a bias. The scholar has some idea of what he or she will find and, after beginning the research, often adjusts the hypothesis, depending on what the facts may begin to show. This does not, however, render the academic pursuit worthless or damaging to the field of inquiry. As Ash explains, “Study after study demonstrates that we are all apologists for our personal worldviews and that holding worldviews doesn’t vitiate scholarly discourse. At times, all people seek data for an interpretation rather than an interpretation for the data” (p. 81). In short, Ash argues, it would be wrong to draw lines that would exclude apologetics from the arena of academics. In fact, the act of doing so would itself be an exercise in apologetics. At this juncture, the reader cannot help but remember Van Dyke’s introductory essay, and the manner in which his unacknowledged or unconscious biases skewed his account of Mormon apologetics.

Benjamin E. Park

Following appropriately on the words of Michael Ash, the discussion then shifts to one regarding the place of apologetics in academia. Benjamin Park argues that it has no place, contending that it would be best for Mormon studies and for apologetics alike if there were a “wall of separation” between the two disciplines. However, it is unclear what Park means by this or how it would be accomplished. It would be strange to think that Park actually suggests that the Neal A. Maxwell Institute, which holds itself out as an institution engaged in “Mormon studies,” should prohibit work that defends the Church, either by responding to critics or by publishing material that helps strengthen commitment to the Church. It would also be strange to think that Park may be calling

for FairMormon to discontinue work that constitutes “Mormon studies.” How can an organization defend Mormonism and not engage in a study of Mormonism? Should a Mormon studies program discriminate against work that happens to strengthen faith in the Church? If it overtly did so, could it still maintain academic credibility, or would it come to be seen as an organization with an ax to grind against the Church?

Park provides two examples of how what he has been suggesting has worked. The first is Paul Reeve’s publication *Religion of a Different Color* with Oxford University Press. However, as Park points out, Reeve appeared at the FairMormon conference to discuss this work. So it is unclear how this constitutes a successful separation of Mormon studies and apologetics. Park explains that Reeve addressed non-Mormon audiences as well as Mormon ones. Similarly, the other supposed example of a successful approach was that of Patrick Mason, who published *The Mormon Menace* with Oxford University Press and also *Planted* with Deseret Book, a strange example, since these works address two entirely different subjects. In any event, the suggestion here is that in order to maintain a successful separation of Mormon studies and apologetics, a scholar must address non-Mormon and Mormon groups separately. Does this mean the Maxwell Institute should not write for Mormons? Should FairMormon not reach out to non-Mormons or respond to critics outside the Church? One is left wondering whether creating a “wall of separation” between apologetics and Mormon studies would be either workable or desirable. And one is again struck by Park’s failure to account for Mormon studies — like all academic disciplines — as having its own set of agendas, biases and presuppositions that might influence its product every bit as much as they would that of a religious apologist. Ironically, Park himself offers an “apologetic” (i.e., a reasoned argument for a proposition that is not a question of pure fact) against apologetics.

Ralph C. Hancock

Though Park did not take up this vital aspect of the question, Ralph Hancock next explores the futility of seeking pure objectivity in the practice of Mormon studies. He admits those who engage in religious apologetics maintain certain fundamental commitments:

Are we to imagine that, unlike the mere “apologist,” the “secular” student of Mormonism wakes up every morning ready to cast all inherited and habitual elements of his worldview aside and to start afresh to discover the meaning of life — including his own scholarly activity — with not the

slightest prejudice in favor of, say, what he has already been doing, what people expect him to do, what others praise and pay him to do, etc.?” (p. 94)

Hancock addresses directly the “wall of separation” model proposed by Park, concluding that this is a transparent attempt to put scholars who overtly defend the Church into a box where they are excluded from academic discussions:

On the one hand, exclusion of believing voices and the emphasis on one or another scholarly framework that excludes the problem of ultimate meaning can only result in the reduction of Mormonism to a network of explanatory causality that leaves no opening for the question of religious truth. On the other hand, the narrowing of faith to a subjective, non-rational feeling or identity strips Mormonism, or any other religion, of its claim of access to things as they really are. In practice, the “good fence” strategy is transparently a means of rendering the content of religious belief harmless and irrelevant to serious engagements with what is held to be reality. (p. 95)

Hancock next addresses the criticism that apologetics often carries too harsh a tone. He observes that criticisms of tone are rarely, if ever, backed by examples. He concedes that such examples are likely to be found if searched out. However, Hancock contends, a lack of civility and appeals to emotion are as likely to be found among the advocates of a “wall-of-separation” in Mormon studies as among the apologists. And although a harsh tone may undermine persuasive power, it has nothing to do with whether the arguments themselves are true.

Beyond that, it seems that concerns regarding tone perhaps kept the Maxwell Institute from publishing a well-documented review of the podcast “Mormon Stories,” hosted by the now-excommunicated John Dehlin. It is hard to see how the cause of truth, scholarship, or even charity were served by the suppression of this review. Indeed, while the publishers of the *Mormon Studies Review* may have seen themselves as charitable toward Dehlin for refusing to expose his apostate activities, Hancock asks, “Was it really a responsible exercise of Christian love, either toward Dehlin or toward those seducible by his fairly crude but specious arts, to suppress publication?” (p. 99). While some costs may have been imposed by non-Mormon scholars and critics of the Church had the review been published in the *Mormon Studies Review*, “the costs

involved in ignoring and thereby seeming to grant the legitimacy of attacks on the Church are not negligible” (p. 99).

Perhaps the publishers of the *Mormon Studies Review* wished to be seen as neutral regarding the criticisms Dehlin leveled against the Church. One wonders how the publishers will respond when scholars submit publications that, rather than criticize an enemy of the Church, criticize the Church itself? Will the editors also suppress such an article and risk being seen as non-objective advocates for the Church? If they publish an article openly critical of the Church, will their standing with Brigham Young University be in jeopardy? It raises legitimate questions with regard to the sustainability of a Mormon studies program at the Church’s university.

As those promoting secular Mormon studies seek respect and legitimacy in the academy, Hancock insightfully observes that “there are two main ways in which distinctively LDS views normally run afoul of respectable scholarly opinion: let’s call them 1) history and 2) sex” (pp. 109–10). It is interesting to observe here that these are two of the main areas of focus of the “Mormon Stories” podcast. When it came to exposing John Dehlin as one who does not subscribe to the core historical claims of the Church and does not support the Church’s positions on sex and family matters, the Maxwell Institute shied away from open confrontation. If one is trying to ingratiate oneself to the scholars of modern academia, standing up for the reality of angelic visitations or for traditional marriage simply will not do. This suggests that in order to be successful in the field of secular Mormon studies, certain claims made by the Church regarding history and family structure will remain open to attack by critics who will remain unopposed by Mormon practitioners of secular Mormon studies. (In the present volume, Van Dyke’s criticism of the Church’s claims about child rearing in traditional families in the wake of the gay marriage debate becomes almost predictable if Hancock is correct.)

Brian D. Birch

Brian Birch returns to the history addressed in Van Dyke’s essay regarding the Church’s uneasy relationship with academia. In fact, at this point in the volume, especially following not only Van Dyke’s overview but also the essays of Park and Hancock, Birch’s paper seems a bit superfluous. Nevertheless, Birch’s essay exceeds Van Dyke’s in fleshing out the history and development of secular Mormon studies versus apologetics in the Church. The article goes into more detail regarding the development of scholars within the Church in the first half of the twentieth century, the skepticism that arose regarding excessive intellectualism, and also the rise of apologetics during the second

half of the twentieth century. He discusses Hugh Nibley, the *FARMS Review*, and the unceremonial ouster of Dan Peterson from the Maxwell Institute. Yet he merely asks the same questions posed by these preceding authors: Can a Mormon scholar serve two masters? Is it really possible to be a successful academic in the field of religious studies and also defend the Church against the attacks of scholarly critics?

In a fashion similar to that of Van Dyke and Park, Birch also overstates the Church's resistance to academia and, unfortunately, misrepresents the Church's statement regarding symposia. One who is unfamiliar with the history would be led to believe the Church sought to stamp out all academic discussion at symposia. In fact, the Church's Statement on Symposia expressed more narrow concerns regarding symposia that "included some presentations relating to the House of the Lord, the holy temples, that are offensive"; and some material that was "seized upon and publicized in such a way as to injure the Church or its members or to jeopardize the effectiveness or safety of our missionaries."¹²

More generally speaking, Van Dyke, Park, and Birch tend to create an impression that during the second half of the twentieth century, the Church was led by men who sought to suppress intellectual inquiry in favor of total reliance on authoritative statements from Church headquarters.¹³ (We here again see the influence of a controlling bias or *myth* prevalent among disaffected Mormons and some Mormon studies academics.) They suggest that since then, due to the Internet, Church leaders lost their ability to control the internal discussion of Church history and doctrine; leaders now have no choice but to turn to academics to sort out the thorny issues raised by critics. If this is truly their view, it is sad to observe how Van Dyke, Park, and Birch all seem to suggest that the practitioners of secular Mormon studies should not bother themselves with responding to the attacks of critics, since they must expend their effort in building bridges toward non-Mormon intellectuals in the hope of building academic credibility for the field of secular Mormon studies and that building a small fiefdom where those with religious studies degrees can make a living and contribute to

12. "Statement on Symposia," *Ensign*, November 1991, <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1991/11/news-of-the-church/statement-on-symposia?lang=eng>.

13. Birch concludes his article with a quote from Harold B. Lee: "[I]f anything squares not with the revelations, then we may be certain it is not truth." He juxtaposes this quote over one of the evangelical preacher Billy Sunday, who said "the consensus of scholarship can plumb go to hell" (p. 138). Birch suggests that these quotes reflect the same perspective.

the existing body of academic literature is more important than using their considerable talents to build the Kingdom of God. They cannot be blamed for wanting to pursue their interests and make a living. However, to the extent they argue that in order to be credible scholars, they simply cannot defend prophets and revelation and must instead adopt a purely secular approach to religion — and suppress or denigrate the work of those who do offer a reasoned defense — they only add credence to some of the concerns regarding excessive intellectualism raised by Church authorities in the 1980s.

Juliann Reynolds

The next section of the book consists of three articles that discuss women's issues. Juliann Reynolds begins by noting that early in Church history, Mormon women played a prominent role in defending the Church, ironically enough, during the era when the Church was under attack for the practice of polygamy. In the face of prevailing assumptions that the Church degraded and demeaned women, these early female apologists argued, in effect, as Sharon Eubank would declare at the FairMormon conference more than a century later, "This is a woman's church!"¹⁴

Of course, Reynolds notes, while many women today consider themselves defenders of the faith, it is a rare woman who would call herself an "apologist." This is perhaps partly due to confusion over what the term means, which rarely enters the Mormon lexicon. It is unclear why else that might be, but what is clear is that Mormon women have not gotten involved in groups like FairMormon or Book of Mormon Central in the same proportions as men. Reynolds observes that as of 2015, women made up only 18 percent of the FairMormon volunteers (p. 149).

Nevertheless, while it is fair of Reynolds to observe that women are not involved with the traditional apologetic organizations at the same rate as men, women who do get involved are often among the most popular and effective of the apologists. This fact was evidenced by the reception of Sharon Eubank's FairMormon address, which was so popular and well-received, it was immediately celebrated with a standing ovation at the conference, it was posted on the Mormon Newsroom's website

14. Sharon Eubank, "This is a Woman's Church," (2014 FairMormon Conference, Utah Valley Convention Center, Provo, UT, August 2014), <https://www.fairmormon.org/conference/august-2014/womans-church>.

within days,¹⁵ and it was later reprinted in the *Ensign* magazine.¹⁶ The excitement with which this address was received is still unparalleled by that of any address given by any male at any FairMormon conference.¹⁷ No one can dispute that women can be effective apologists, and they are very warmly received when they do engage in apologetics. Thus the fact that more women are not involved cannot be attributed to a lack of ability or a calculated resistance toward women's involvement.

The reason women do not get involved in publishing articles and engaging directly with critics in equal numbers as men remains an open question. In a subtle critique of the group dynamics of modern Mormon apologetics, Reynolds suggests that it may be related to the reason women do not participate in the science and engineering workforce or politics in numbers that are equal to those of men. Borrowing from studies conducted by political scientists who have examined the participation of women in group settings, Reynolds notes that women enter apologetic discussions "holding less value and authority because of their gender" (p. 151). She suggests that women are therefore less confident in their ability to engage in situations where conflict is involved, such as in on-line arguments over religion. (p. 151)

Reynolds also wonders whether a reason that Mormon women do not get involved in apologetics as much is because they are overwhelmingly satisfied with their position within the Church. In support of this hypothesis, she cites a 2011 Pew poll which finds "that 90 percent of Mormon women are satisfied with the priesthood policy" (p. 152). However, while this may explain why movements such as Ordain Women have not become more popular, Reynolds seems to suggest that the reason men engage in apologetics is that they are dissatisfied with the way in which the Church is being treated by society, but women are not so concerned. Yet that seems unlikely. Rather, perhaps women have the desire to defend the Church in equal numbers, but they do it in ways not often recognized, even by themselves, as "apologetics."

15. TracieCayfordCudworth, "'ThisIsaWoman'sChurch,' SaysDirectorofHumanitarian Services and LDS Charities," *Newsroom*, August 12, 2014, <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/this-is-a-womans-church-says-director-humanitarian-services>.

16. Sharon Eubank, "Being a Woman: An Eternal Perspective," *Ensign*, August 2016, <https://www.lds.org/ensign/2016/08/being-a-woman-an-eternal-perspective?lang=eng>.

17. Similarly, as Reynolds notes, the FairMormon addresses of Neylan McBaine and Valerie Hudson Cassler were included in a volume published by Oxford University Press called *Mormon Feminism: Essential Writings* (p. 152). Neylan McBaine also expanded upon her FairMormon address and published a best-selling book with Greg Kofford Books entitled *Women at Church*.

One striking example of this phenomenon may be the rise of Mormon Women Stand, an organization founded in 2014 in the wake of calls for the ordination of women to the priesthood by Ordain Women and the now-excommunicated Kate Kelly. “By September 2015, Mormon Women Stand had nearly 40,000 members, and in some weeks, a Facebook reach of 1.2 million people” (p. 148).¹⁸ The group is not normally included among those referred to as “apologetic.” However, from a brief review of the topics of interest to its members, which includes apostasy, priesthood authority, homosexuality, and immigration, this group is dedicated to defending the Church from a woman’s perspective.

Reynolds acknowledges various other efforts by women to defend the Church that are not normally counted among “apologetic” enterprises, such as posting Church-friendly comments on Twitter and Facebook, podcasting, and the publishing of the popular *Meridian Magazine*, co-founded by Harvard-educated Maurine Proctor. To these efforts, we could add the activities of countless Mormon “mommy bloggers,” such as Stephanie Nielson and others.¹⁹ While women who publish academic papers, present at conferences, and directly engage with critics are welcomed and have proven their effectiveness, perhaps we should worry less about trying to force women into an ancient box called “apologetics” and learn to recognize and celebrate the new and varied ways in which women are choosing to defend the Church on their own terms.

Julie M. Smith

Though she does not claim that it is deliberate, Julie Smith observes that because apologists are mostly men, there are times when apologetic arguments tend to be discouraging or even harmful to women. She suggests that this is the case in topics such as polygamy and the priesthood. She doesn’t elaborate on specific examples of the male apologists’ offenses. Rather, in an effort to help prevent these negative, likely unintended, consequences of apologetics, Smith suggests four guideposts for apologists to follow in framing arguments that involve women.

18. As of this writing, the Mormon Women Stand Facebook page has 53,603 followers. By contrast, FairMormon has 8,589, and the Interpreter Foundation has 3,071.

19. Stephanie Nielson, *NieNie Dialogues* (blog), <http://www.nieniedialogues.com/>. For a discussion on the success of Mormon mommy bloggers and thoughts regarding the missionary work that attends such efforts, see Herb Scribner, “The reason why Mormon mommy bloggers are so successful.” *Deseret News*, September 23, 2016.

The first principle is inversion: This “requires the apologist to invert the position of the genders and determine if the argument being proposed is still logical and palatable” (p. 156). It is an intriguing suggestion and may be very helpful. Of course, it applies only in situations where there are no differences between men and women or in situations that would offend people who assume that men and women are identical.

Second, Smith asks apologists to consider if what we are saying about the state of our experience on earth is consistent with what we know about the heavenly state. This would be a helpful guideline to the extent we have clear knowledge of what things are like in heaven. However, given the fact that so much of what is said about heaven is speculative, it may be better to avoid making such comparisons, for they may create other problems with an apologetic argument. For example, she assumes that our Heavenly Mother is not primarily involved with nurturing, so we should not expect women on earth to be primarily nurturing. However, she provides no evidence of the way that we were raised by our Heavenly Mother before we came to this earth that would lead us to conclude that our exalted Mother is not nurturing.²⁰

The third principle requires that we apply a “strict scrutiny” test to apologetic arguments that are consistent with our cultural practices. In other words, we should be skeptical and consider rejecting arguments that conform to our current cultural beliefs and practices. As an example, Smith states that “the belief that women are naturally nurturing deserves strict scrutiny as culturally conforming” (p. 162).

Certainly it would be wise to ask ourselves whether our arguments are unduly influenced by cultural biases. But Smith is not clear on just how skeptical we should be. By using the term “strict scrutiny,” Smith, perhaps unknowingly, borrows a phrase from constitutional law that refers to the highest of legal standards when considering whether a law violates constitutional rights. The standard is so high, in fact, that it is commonly assumed that if a strict scrutiny standard applies in assessing the validity of a law, the law will most likely be ruled unconstitutional.

Of course, Smith does not seem to suggest that arguments that are consistent with our culture should usually be rejected, but she comes close when she concedes that “surely not everything which aligns with the larger culture is necessarily contrary to the gospel” (p. 162). Of course she

20. Of course, the concept that “[m]others are primarily responsible for the nurture of their children” does not emerge from irresponsible apologetics, but rather from the text of “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” *Ensign*, November 1995, <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1995/11/the-family-a-proclamation-to-the-world?lang=eng>.

also uses the phrases “extra scrutiny” and “close examination” (p. 161), thus further confusing the standard she sets. Further, she admits that the “standard does not demand the abandonment of this belief simply because it conforms to the culture” (p. 161). Still, the way in which this standard is to be applied is unclear.

Also, it is unclear how this standard is supposed to help avoid harming women. Which culture are we to measure our arguments against? Smith references the “larger culture” in reference to two *Ensign* articles, which in this case would probably mean American culture, or perhaps Western culture (pp. 160–61). Smith seems to assume that Western culture has a tendency to denigrate women so should be rooted out of our arguments whenever possible. So are we to conclude that if a belief is consistent with the cultural practices of the smaller culture of Saudi Arabia, we run less risk of offending women and no longer need to examine our assumptions? Although that is a dubious proposition, it is nevertheless always wise to check one’s biases.

Smith’s fourth and final proposition is that we should take care to avoid “dismissing the strands of tradition that do not mesh well with current practice” (p. 165). Smith correctly notes the many competing strands within Mormon history, doctrine, and culture. For example, when the end of polygamy was announced, some plural wives rejoiced and others did not. Smith suggests that apologists should be careful to take into account the variations in history and doctrine and not cling too tightly to one strand over another: “There has been a demonstrable tension in the Church’s teachings; in order to be faithful to the entire Mormon tradition, apologetics needs to maintain that tension — not smooth it out” (p. 164). Fair enough. However, again, it is not clear how this approach will necessarily help women avoid pain. One woman may take comfort in knowing there were early plural wives who rejoiced as polygamy ended. But the same woman may be distressed to learn that some women did not favor ending the practice.

All in all, Smith makes some valuable suggestions in helping to ensure apologetic arguments are more solid and well-reasoned. However, not all the suggestions are helpful, and it is not clear that these suggestions will help to prevent the pain to women that we all hope to avoid.

Fiona Givens

Of all the articles in this volume, I found this one to be the most intriguing. However, it seems the least likely article to be included with the others because it does not actually discuss apologetics. To be sure,

the article itself offers an apologetic in support of the exalted role that women should play in the historical and modern Church. Indeed, it argues in favor of acknowledging that when we speak of “God” as an exalted being, we speak not only of a father but of a mother as well.

She recounts the statements of Joseph Smith and other early leaders of the Church that explicitly state that men and women are exalted together and that we have a Heavenly Mother as well as a Heavenly Father. She notes that while Charles Penrose was editor of the *Millennial Star*, an editorial published by that paper held that our Heavenly Mother was, in fact, the third member of the Godhead, also known as the Holy Spirit (p. 174). She continues by reviewing some of the history of the ancient Jews and early Christians which suggests that the Mormon belief in a Mother in Heaven is not an invention of the modern Church.

She then proceeds to discuss various ways in which women have been expected to hold positions of authority in the Kingdom of God. In addition to indications in the Bible that various women were considered to hold positions of respect and authority, some even called *prophetesses*, in the modern Church, members such as Eliza R. Snow understood the Relief Society would enable women to become “Queens of Queens, and Priestesses unto the Most High God” (p. 180).

At this point, I should mention an aspect of the article that one should approach with caution. Givens, noting that it has been said that Joseph “ordained” women in the Relief Society (p. 190), concludes that Emma therefore held “the keys to preside over the Relief Society” (p. 190). This point of history was elaborated on in a Gospel Topics article published by the Church:

In organizing the Relief Society, Joseph spoke of “ordain[ing]” women and said that Relief Society officers would “preside over the Society.” He also declared, “I now turn the key to you in the name of God.”

These statements indicate that Joseph Smith delegated priesthood authority to women in the Relief Society. Joseph’s language can be more fully understood in historical context. During the 19th century, Latter-day Saints used the term *keys* to refer at various times to authority, knowledge, or temple ordinances. Likewise, Mormons sometimes used the term *ordain* in a broad sense, often interchangeably with *set apart* and not always referring to priesthood office. On these points, Joseph’s actions illuminate the meaning of his words: neither Joseph Smith, nor any person acting on his behalf, nor any of his

successors conferred the Aaronic or Melchizedek Priesthood on women or ordained women to priesthood office.

In later years, words like *ordination* and *keys* were more precisely defined, as when President John Taylor, who acted by assignment from Joseph Smith to “ordain and set apart” Emma Smith and her counselors, explained in 1880 that “the ordination then given did not mean the conferring of the Priesthood upon those sisters.” Women did receive authority to preside in the women’s organization and to appoint officers as needed to conduct the organization in the pattern of the priesthood, including being led by a president with counselors.²¹

So the official position of the Church is that while Emma did preside over the Relief Society, she was not ordained to a priesthood office with the keys to direct the work of the organization in the same way that, for example, a bishop is ordained to his office and given keys to direct the affairs of a ward. Givens needs to engage this perspective, or at least acknowledge its existence and its considerable doctrinal authority, given the statements by President Taylor and others. To leave it unmentioned and unengaged risks misleading the reader. Nevertheless, Givens’s larger points are interesting, informative, and helpful in establishing the important role women have played and should continue to play in our families, the Church, and in the heavens.

David Knowlton

David Knowlton next engages in a criticism of FairMormon with respect to its apologetic approach to some of the issues pertaining to Lamanites. Mormons have long been assailed by some critics for being racist, not only due to withholding priesthood ordination and temple access to African Americans but also because the Book of Mormon describes a curse that came upon the Lamanites for their iniquity and a “skin of blackness” described as having come upon the Lamanites “that they might not be enticing unto” the Nephites. (See 2 Nephi 5:21, and also Jacob 3:5, 8–9; Alma 3:4–19.) The Book of Mormon later states that once Lamanites joined with the Nephites, “their curse was taken from them, and their skin became white like unto to Nephites” (3 Ne. 2:12–15).

21. “Joseph Smith’s Teachings about Priesthood, Temple, Women”, Topics, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, published October 2015, <https://www.lds.org/topics/joseph-smiths-teachings-about-priesthood-temple-and-women?lang=eng>.

It is easy to see how critics and mainstream Mormons alike could conclude from these various verses that the Book of Mormon describes a phenomenon whereby the skin of the unrighteous actually became darker until they repented, when it then became lighter. In response to the critics who claim that Mormons are racists, apologists have developed a number of alternative interpretations of these verses, suggesting that these verses should be read metaphorically or that they refer to cultural rather than physiological differences.²²

Rather than engaging in a discussion of whether these various alternative interpretations are valid, Knowlton seems to question the need even to respond to the critics. Knowlton claims, without evidence, that what the scholars of FairMormon are really doing is not responding to critics. Rather, “at the heart of their quest lies a crisis of faith” (p. 207) over statements regarding Lamanites and race made by General Authorities and found in the Book of Mormon. Knowlton claims that FairMormon members turn to scholarship to manage this crisis of faith and “do not take seriously the thought and ways of Mormons who, not being scholars and intellectuals, manage to create lives of faith and obedience without falling into the textual crisis of faith. The apologists allow themselves no out except exegesis” (p. 207).

Knowlton also claims that FairMormon apologists create a division between faithful Mormons and critics similar to that which exists in the Book of Mormon between the Nephites and Lamanites. He claims that the apologists see themselves as the righteous Nephites, while the critics and cultural Mormons (whom Knowlton defines as Mormons who lack faith) are the unrighteous Lamanites (pp. 198, 202, 207). Again, he draws these conclusions without offering evidence. He suggests that FairMormon has supposedly done a terrible thing but does not elaborate on this point. He also claims that FairMormon apologists create divisions between themselves and non-scholarly Mormons by suggesting that they possess a more scholarly understanding of the scriptures (p. 208).

In summary, Knowlton uses FairMormon’s discussion of the Lamanites as a way to criticize apologetics generally but does not offer much evidence or reasoning. Knowlton apparently sees the apologetic enterprise as one that creates needless divisions and serves only to assuage a supposed crisis of faith experienced exclusively by the apologists themselves.

22. See the discussion and various sources cited in: “The Lamanite Curse”, *Find Answers*, FairMormon, accessed August 31, 2017, https://www.fairmormon.org/answers/Book_of_Mormon/Lamanites/Curse.

While it is certainly true that countless Mormons have remained faithful to the Church before FairMormon came along, Knowlton gives us no reason to believe that, on balance, the Church is worse off because of apologetics; that no divisions would exist within its ranks; or that no one would otherwise experience a crisis of faith.²³ Knowlton would have us believe that there exists a class of Mormons he calls the “non-scholars,” who never experience a crisis of faith and thus have no need for scholarly apologetics. These “non-scholars” are apparently never exposed to arguments by critics of the Church, so the real villains are the apologists who create unnecessary divisions between themselves, the “non-scholars,” and the critics. One wonders what alternative to responding to the critics Knowlton imagines, but he never provides one.

Loyd Isao Ericson

Loyd Ericson attacks apologetics on a different front, arguing that religious claims cannot be defended through secular scholarship, so the effort to do so is futile or even harmful. He writes that “rather than defending any religious claims, apologetics actually establishes or affirms the false criterion by which those religious beliefs may be unfortunately lost. In other words, instead of tearing down potential stumbling blocks to faith, Mormon apologetics actually and unknowingly engages in building and establishing those blocks” (p. 209).

In arguing that apologetics cannot help defend religious claims, Ericson defines his terms in ways that assume what he is trying to prove. He begins by clarifying that he does not address *apologetics* in its broad sense, where the word is used to refer to “an argument defending a position.” Rather, he specifically addresses *religious apologetics*, which he defines as the “attempt to *utilize scholarship* to prove or defend religious claims” (p. 210).

“Religious claims,” as the phrase is defined by Ericson, “are not the sort of thing that can be proven or defended with [the tools of philosophy and scholarship]” (p. 211). He writes that these include statements such as that “The Book of Mormon is the word of God,” and “Joseph Smith is a prophet of God” (p. 212). Ericson emphasizes the point that “religious claims are things of the soul and can be evaluated and known only by

23. Knowlton’s thesis also sits uneasily with the Church’s decision to list FairMormon, The Interpreter Foundation and Book of Mormon Central among the resources that “can enhance gospel learning and help provide answers to doctrinal, historical, and social questions.” See “Gospel Topics, Essays, and Other Resources,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, retrieved September 12, 2017, <https://www.lds.org/si/objective/doctrinal-mastery/gospel-sources?lang=eng>.

the experiences of the soul” (p. 220). In other words, apologetics is the attempt to utilize scholarship to prove or defend things that “can only be known by experiences of the soul” (p. 221) — that is to say, not by or through scholarship. Another way of saying this would be, ‘apologetics is the attempt to do something that cannot be done.’

Ericson contends not only that the tools of scholarship are unable to penetrate the realm of spiritual knowledge but also that defending religious claims with scholarship can place stumbling blocks in the path of believers, since what is known through scholarship tends to change over time. If one bases one’s belief in religious claims on scholarship, one’s belief may be undermined at a later time as the scholarship changes (p. 212). Ericson advises that we should therefore avoid placing our religious beliefs at the mercy of scholarship (p. 213).

Ericson ignores a key point here, however: Secular scholarship is often marshaled (rightly or wrongly) to attack religious claims. One wonders if Ericson would likewise claim that antireligious apologetics has no place in scholarship. That is, no one ought to attempt to utilize scholarship to *disprove* or *attack* religious claims. If he would accept this corollary to his claim, then what are we to do when someone “misuses” scholarship to disprove or attack a religious claim? Do we allow such attempts to pass unanswered?

Do “real scholars,” even in the secular field of Mormon studies, not have a duty to reject or rebut such efforts? If they do, aren’t they then engaging in the forbidden activity of religious apologetics? And if not, why do covenant members of the Church not have a duty to respond to an abuse of both scholarship and the Church? If Ericson does not accept that it is illegitimate to use scholarship to disprove religious claims — while insisting that religious believers have no business using scholarship to defend religious claims — then we have a double standard at work.

As Ericson uses the term *scholarship*, he seems to exclude the kinds of apologetic arguments used in the scriptures by prophets, apostles, and Christ Himself. Dan Peterson references this point in his article, as discussed above. Ericson indicates the word *scholarship* includes “studies in fields such as historical research and methodology, philosophy, biblical and textual studies, ancient languages, genetics, anthropology, and archaeology” (p. 210). Of course, the methods of modern scholarship were largely unavailable to the ancient prophets and apostles, so we cannot know whether they would have used them had they been available.

An exception to this may be where the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants specifically indicate that witnesses should be relied on to establish the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon (see Ether 5:2–4; 2 Ne. 27:12–14; D&C 5:11–13). The testimony of these witnesses is to “stand as a testimony against the world at the last day” (Ether 5:4). Using the statements of witnesses in crafting historical arguments is a method of modern historical scholarship. It seems that Ericson would nevertheless reject the use of witness testimony as a viable means of defending the Church when it would seem to be a use of scholarship to defend religious claims.

Ericson’s argument that apologetics cannot be used to support religious claims also depends on such narrow definitions of *religious claims* and *apologetics* that it is not relevant to a discussion of most criticisms against the Church. For example, in what is generally called *Christian apologetics*, it is commonly argued that Mormons are not Christians. This argument might rely on creedal statements about the Godhead, or it might point to various scriptures that are interpreted by creedal Christians differently than Mormon Christians. Presumably, Ericson would not object to a Mormon responding to this argument, but he would likely call the exercise one of theology and not of “apologetics,” since it addresses theological claims and not “religious claims.” Nevertheless, the effect of a Mormon response to this argument would be to defend what most people would likely say are core religious claims of the Church.

Similarly, if one were to respond with historical evidence to an argument that the witnesses of the plates on which the Book of Mormon was written did not really see the plates, Ericson might say that this is an exercise in historical scholarship and not “apologetics.” Yet again, by the ordinary meaning of the words, defending with historical documents the claim that there were witnesses who saw the plates helps to defend the religious claim that the Book of Mormon is the word of God.

Furthermore, when theology and historical research are used to respond to critics of the Church, this scholarship can help create the space within which spiritual conviction can thrive. For example, a person who has been told that Mormons are not Christians might resist even studying the Book of Mormon. In order for that person to have the religious experience to which Ericson refers, that person may first need to overcome the reluctance to read the Book of Mormon. A theological argument, called *apologetics* by most people, though not by Ericson, may be necessary in order to clear the way to a spiritual manifestation of the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon.

In seeking to convince us that using scholarship to support faith is futile and harmful, Erickson claims that “when faithful Latter-day Saints study the Book of Mormon as *scripture*, they are not trying to identify where in the Western Hemisphere the events took place. ... They are looking for inspiration on how to raise their families, deal ethically in their community, strengthen their relationship with the divine, situate themselves in a world of suffering, and ‘know to what source they may look for a remission of their sins’ (2 Nephi 25:26)” (p. 214). Certainly these are reasons that people read the Book of Mormon. However, why should we think they are the only reasons? Do not families and investigators of the Church also read the Book of Mormon in order to help them determine whether this Church is what it claims to be? That Joseph Smith is a prophet and the Book of Mormon is a history of an ancient people who lived on the American continent? And cannot a scholarly examination of such things — not only the structure of the book itself but also such things as archeology and ancient documents — help to answer those questions? Ericson’s response is essentially “No, only experiences of the soul can help us to know religious claims.”

Ericson makes a valid point when he draws a distinction between things known through scholarship and things known through “whispers of the Spirit, burning bosoms, visions or other subjective religious experiences” (p. 210). However, while it would be correct to conclude that we should not base our testimony solely on scholarship, dangers lie in basing it solely on “subjective religious experiences” as well. For example, not all those who were converted by such experiences remain loyal to the Church. They may later come to doubt what they have felt, often because of challenges posed by scholarship. This may be why we are counseled to “teach one another words of wisdom; yea, seek ye out of the best books words of wisdom; seek learning, even by study and also by faith” (D&C 88:118). Religious claims “survive at the mercy of scholarship” (p. 213) only when that is all they are founded on, instead of being more broadly founded on spiritual experience, personal application, etc. There is no reason why we must limit ourselves to only one mode of knowledge.

One can imagine how a person might begin to doubt the spiritual manifestation one has experienced when it is argued by a critic of the Church that the witnesses of the plates did not really see the plates. These doubts may be overcome by some historical scholarship, and thus confidence might be restored in what was felt and understood to be a spiritual confirmation that the Book of Mormon is true. In this way, historical scholarship, which is often called *apologetics*, serves as a way

of helping to maintain the religious understanding that the Book of Mormon is true. Many other illustrations could doubtless be reviewed in many other fields, including archaeology, anthropology, linguistics, and even fields like genetics, psychology, and sociology.

In fact, not only can secular scholarship help maintain one's confidence in past spiritual experiences or clear the way for a new religious experience, many people report having had religious experiences through the study of secular topics. (I would include myself among these people.) Nevertheless, Ericson criticizes Brian and Laura Hales for saying that their "examination of the historical record has *reinforced our convictions* that Joseph was a virtuous man and a *true prophet* of the living God" (p. 220). Ericson claims that their religious conviction that Joseph is a prophet of God is based on revelation, not historical research and therefore "can only be evaluated and known by experiences of the soul" (p. 221).

Of course, it is not clear whether Brian and Laura Hales are claiming that their convictions that Joseph Smith is a prophet were strengthened merely by scholarship or if it was through scholarship attended by a spiritual confirmation. In either event, Christ said that we can know a prophet by his fruits (Matt. 7:15–20). To a large degree, the fruits of Joseph Smith's work are a part of the historical record and therefore can be examined using the tools of a historian.

Also, Ericson gives us no reason to think it impossible that the study of history may act as a catalyst in producing a religious experience. Much of what is written in the scriptures purports to be a recounting of history. Why should it be impossible to have an "experience of the soul" when reading, for example, Joseph's Smith's recounting of his First Vision? And if it is possible to develop a spiritual conviction based on a study of this history, why not through a study of historical documents that have not been canonized? Indeed, why should it not be possible to have an "experience of the soul" when studying not only history but also archaeology, anthropology, or even linguistics?

Ericson is of course correct to the extent he contends that you cannot argue a person into having a spiritual experience (p. 216). However, as we have seen, various arguments, or rationally persuasive techniques, may be helpful before a person is willing to do what is necessary to have a spiritual experience. And further reasoning is sometimes necessary so that a person may continue to have confidence in past spiritual experiences. Ericson may not want to call those kinds of arguments *apologetics*. Yet by the common definition of the term, that is what they are.

David Bokovoy

In yet another critique of apologetics, David Bokovoy first establishes the premise that prophets are fallible and scripture is not inerrant. He begins by recounting his own experience with the Adam-God theory and the “faith crisis” he experienced when he found that Bruce R. McConkie had written that Brigham Young’s view on the matter was mistaken (pp. 223–24). He then recounts his experience in discovering Biblical Historical Criticism as a graduate student at Brandeis and how he came to accept the idea that the Bible had separate documentary sources (the *Documentary Hypothesis*) (p. 226). He then notes how the Book of Mormon itself cautions us that it may contain mistakes. (See, e.g., 1 Nephi 19:6 and Title Page of the Book of Mormon.)

Bokovoy then shifts the discussion to a criticism of apologetics, which he defines as “an active attempt to defend a specific religious paradigm or belief system” (p. 227). He claims that “apologetics assumes that we *have* the answers. Instead of allowing critical thinking to shape our relationship and understanding with divinity, apologetic defense may simply disguise a fear that God and the universe are much more complex than we would like to believe” (p. 227). Once again, we see assumptions made about the apologetic enterprise that are not supported by the citation of evidence but instead seem based on unexamined or unacknowledged biases arising out of a secular religious studies orientation. One would think, from Bokovoy’s formulation, that scholars of Mormonism never assume they “*have* the answers” but always “allow ... critical thinking to shape ... [their] understanding.” Yet, as Michael Ash and Ralph Hancock discussed in their articles, this is unlikely, if not impossible. Religious apologists and Mormon studies apologists may have more in common than the latter would like to admit.

In starting his essay with his own personal experience, Bokovoy seems to be telling us that he is the one who sought to defend an entire religious system, that he oversimplified things and did not allow critical thinking to shape his understanding of religion. However, there is no reason to believe this is a necessary stance for all apologists of the Church. Indeed, a Mormon apologist need not even attempt to defend the entire system at once or believe to have all of the answers. Most Mormon apologists specialize in certain areas and may address specific and discrete issues, such as polygamy, the Book of Abraham, the Book of Mormon, or other such topics. A Mormon apologist is quite unlikely to claim to have all the answers or to be unwilling to consider new evidence. So although Bokovoy may have been the kind of apologist he describes,

he gives us no reason to believe that all Mormon apologists are alike in this way. Furthermore, if Bokovoy approached the defense of Mormon matters in this unwise manner, is it beyond the realm of possibility that he or another Mormon studies author might make the same error within the Mormon studies discipline?

Bokovoy emphasizes that he is “not entirely opposed to apologetics. But [he is] opposed to academic apologetics” (p. 231). He writes, “I do not believe that the tools of scholarship can be used to establish the validity of religious experiences” (p. 231). An apologist who uses empirical facts to create a case for his religious convictions is fighting a losing battle. I believe apologetics, therefore, is best performed by simply demonstrating to others the spiritual benefits to living a religious life” (p. 232).

As an example of why he opposes academic apologetics, he explains that a historian “seeks to uncover the most likely things that occurred in the past” (p. 231). Since miracles are unlikely, “historians can never take seriously such miraculous things as golden plates or resurrection. These things may be true, but they are beyond the ability of a historian to address. They are matters of religious belief.”

Of course it is true that in assessing the reliability of historical evidence, it is helpful to consider, among other criteria, whether certain conclusions regarding the evidence are probable or not considering what is generally accepted about how the world works. This would suggest that secular historians would conclude that miracles do not occur. However, that does not mean the tools of modern historical analysis are entirely unfit for use in defending the Church. Certain major claims may be made, such as that the Church is true or that Joseph Smith talked to God, which we cannot establish by secular means. However, certain other claims can be examined by historians, such as how long it took for Joseph Smith to produce the Book of Mormon. Did Joseph Smith have the skills or access to the materials that would be necessary to produce metal plates? Did Joseph Smith have access to historical documents that could help explain the depth and complexity of the Book of Mormon? Similarly, the tools of archaeology, genetics, and other sciences can be used to examine other such narrow claims. Critics of the Church do not usually make broad, conclusory assertions such as “The Book of Mormon is a fraud” and let it rest at that. They usually make various narrow claims in support of the major conclusion that the Church is not true. Apologists can respond to these narrow claims by use of the tools of modern academia. And while

such scholarly argument does not “create belief,” it “maintains a climate in which belief may flourish” (p. 31, quoting Austin Farrer).

If Bokovoy means to say that we cannot, using the tools of secular academics, definitely establish that the man called “Nephi” in the Book of Mormon existed, saw angels, and wrote the record of these events in the Book of Mormon, he is correct. But this is a straw man. No apologist claims that we can prove beyond all doubt, through secular means, that the miracles described in the Book of Mormon actually occurred. Perhaps he is merely saying that he personally has found it difficult to maintain a testimony of some matters that relies in any way on scholarship, so no one else should try. Of course this creates a false dichotomy. A testimony need not be founded solely on scholarship or solely on spiritual experiences. As discussed above, we are to learn by study *and* by faith.

Joseph M. Spencer

In the most unique criticism of Mormon apologetics, Joseph Spencer boldly claims that “apologetics should not resolve crises of faith but provoke them” (p. 241); “apologetics fails when it instead attempts to solve doubts too quickly” (p. 241).

To illustrate his point, he cites the example of the time-worn attack against the Book of Mormon that it runs afoul of the injunction found in Revelation 22:18–19 against adding to or taking away “from the words of the book of this prophecy.” Spencer concedes that the standard Mormon responses to this attack are “entirely accurate and largely effective,” That is, (1) that the verse actually refers to the Book of Revelation and not to the Bible as a whole, (2) that the Book of Revelation was likely not the last book in the Bible, so if read as the critics suggest, the verse would prohibit other books in the New Testament itself and not just the Book of Mormon, and (3) that Deuteronomy 4:2 warns not to “add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish ought from it,” which would presumably prohibit not only the Book of Mormon, but also the New Testament and the entire Bible after the Pentateuch. While these apologetic responses are accurate and effective, Spencer complains that they “do nothing to reveal the real stakes of believing the Book of Mormon to be true” (p. 242). In other words, an “ideal apologetic response” should go “far beyond merely undercutting the credibility of the critics or their criticism” (p. 246). Indeed, Spencer would argue that it should go beyond even providing evidence that might support belief. Rather, ideally, “apologetics radicalizes, bringing into the open

how much more extreme the faith demanded by the Restoration is than its critics recognize” (p. 246).

Spencer’s example of the ideal apologetic response to the above attack on the Book of Mormon centers on Nephi’s vision of the coming forth of the Bible, and the Book of Revelation in particular. Spencer points out how Nephi is told that by the time we, in the latter days, receive the Bible, “many parts which are plain and most precious” (1 Ne. 13:26) will have been removed. Spencer further observes that the apostle John is specifically identified as an author who would write “concerning the end of the world” (1 Nephi 14:22, 27) and that his original writings were identified as “plain and pure, and most precious” (1 Nephi 14:23). From this, Spencer concludes, “*The Book of Revelation as it has come down to modern Christianity is already the product of the very taking-away-from warned against within that same book*” (p. 245). Spencer concludes that this is “an ideal apologetic response to the criticism that Revelation 22:18–19 warns against accepting something like the Book of Mormon as scripture” (p. 246).

It is hard to see, however, how this is an ideal argument in favor of the Book of Mormon. Spencer seems to argue that this is an ideal argument *because* it is hard to accept. It makes the “conditions for belief ... *less* favorable” (p. 246). But let us be clear on just why it is hard to accept.

Spencer claims that his argument is hard to accept because “one can no longer attempt to embrace the Book of Mormon without at the same time embracing claims regarding the instability of biblical texts” (p. 246). Because this is a difficult concept to accept, it is “profound,” has “depth,” and “richness,” and is therefore “all the more inviting” (p. 246). However, it is not at all clear that because an argument is difficult to accept, it is necessarily profound, deep or rich.

In a number of more basic ways, Spencer’s argument, as he states it, is hard to accept. First, the Book of Mormon is not explicit in stating that things have been taken away from the Book of Revelation. It directly states only that the Book of Revelation will be in the Bible, and the Bible will have things taken away from it. Of course, it is still ironic that Revelation 22:19 states that nothing should be taken away from the “book” when the angel tells Nephi that by the time we receive the Bible, things will have already have been taken away. But this fact does not respond to the argument that the Book of Mormon adds to the Bible and therefore violates the command of Revelation 22:19.

Next, central to Spencer’s apologetic argument is the point that “the canon is not *simply* but *radically* open” (p. 246). However, the mere fact that things have been taken away from the Bible does not mean that the

canon is open. Also, in order to accept Spencer's argument, one must first accept that the Book of Mormon is the word of God. So Spencer would ask critics of the Book of Mormon to believe the book is true by first assuming the Book of Mormon is true. As a rational argument, this seems less than "ideal."

Seth Payne

Seth Payne argues "that religious apologetics must be approached as a devotional act — an act not necessarily intended to 'rescue' those who question, but rather as an expression of our inner convictions and commitments" (p. 250). He further proposes "that contemporary apologetics should be both formulated and expressed with an awareness of the pastoral theology which motivates all Christian ideals of friendship, empathy, and compassion" (p. 250). Payne offers as an example that the early Christian apologist Justin Martyr "shows great respect for his intended audience. He does so not only with his chosen tone, but also because he shows a deep understanding of the beliefs, traditions, history, and philosophy of the Roman empire" (p. 253).

He concedes that "we need not be weak or timid when we engage in apologetics. Paul was often firm and sharp in both establishing and exerting his apostolic authority, but it is clear that this firmness was born of Paul's deep and abiding love for the Saints" (p. 255). As people who have covenanted to "bear one another's burdens," and "comfort those that stand in need of comfort" (Mos. 18:8–9), Payne calls us to engage in what he calls "pastoral apologetics," which he defines as "a response to doubt that focuses primarily on the spiritual, social, and psychological desire for meaning, purpose, and mysticism" (p. 256–57). He sets this approach in contrast to an academic approach, adding that "propping up spiritual doubt with academic answers is unsustainable in the long-term" (p. 257).

Payne's calls for compassion and care for those we seek to help are a welcome reminder to those of us who engage in the academic study of scripture, for it can become easy for us to become more concerned about ideas than people. Apologetics should be "honest, charitable, respectful, and kind, lest our efforts inadvertently create unnecessary and problematic stumbling blocks for others during their time of spiritual need" (p. 258). And it seems correct, as Payne explains, that our primary concern in ministering to those with doubts should be to "address issues of the heart and the [universal] desire to feel connected to a sense of expansive, or ultimate meaning" (p. 257). However, as Payne's essay progresses, it becomes increasingly unclear what an exercise in "pastoral

apologetics” would look like in practical terms. One might assume it would simply consist of a “kinder and gentler” rational argument. But Payne seems to have something else more expansive in mind.

As he sets out his vision for apologists, he first says that pastoral theology “cannot be bogged down by dogma, policy, tradition, or authority” (p. 257). This may be a fair caution; it recognizes that there may be exceptions to the rule. However, it goes too far to the extent it suggests that such things as doctrine, policy, and authority should be taken lightly.

Despite Payne’s advice, we should recognize that our attempts to help others may tragically backfire if we do not take heed of the counsel of living prophets as we reach out to those in need. Policies set by authorities and even traditions in the Church usually arise out of the wisdom of experience and revelation. Their intent is to help alleviate and avoid suffering and to bring lasting joy. When properly applied, policies and tradition can serve to best help those who are in need, even when those of us with more limited experience and knowledge do not in the moment always recognize how.

Payne then draws a contrast between apologists who have argued “their views in an overly-confident academic manner,” and Christian theologians like Kierkegaard, who have rejected traditional apologetics on the basis that the truth claims of Christianity are not rationally demonstrable and instead must simply be accepted on faith and put into practice. (pp. 258–59) Payne notes that our faith is not “based solely on logic and reason,” but that Mormon missionaries, relying on Moroni 10:4, invite investigators to “seek out and receive a direct spiritual experience” (p. 260).

In this light, Payne complains that “Mormon culture drives us towards abstract correctness wherein tremendous value is placed on certain ‘facts’ that may have very little bearing on the direct experience of divinity” (p. 260). The example Payne provides is the concept that our Heavenly Father has a body of flesh and bones. The mere fact that God has a body is not important. Rather, it is important because it “helps us to feel more connected to Him and gain confidence in His love and willingness to answer sincere prayers” (p. 261). Again, while it is true that we should not emphasize mere facts over the meaning those facts impart to our spiritual lives, it is not at all clear that “Mormon culture” does this. While it is true that we teach of an embodied God, it is not clear that we do this to the exclusion of emphasizing that He is our Father who loves us and wants us to become like Him. Furthermore, if the fact that God has a body is *true*, then it may matter very little whether that fact helps or hinders our faith. One would think that a scholar would

appreciate the value of true facts for their own sake, even if they produce temporary difficulty for some. In any event, the broad concept stands as a fair warning to apologists that they should strive to find the meaning in their work and not merely focus on the raw facts.

As a final warning to apologists, Payne cautions against “exalting rationality above — or even placing it on equal footing with — the precepts of Christian living and Christian community” (p. 262). He warns that “if as defenders of faith in the modern world we lose sight of the devotional and soul-centric aspects of apologetics, *we have failed, utterly and absolutely*” (p. 263). These are strong statements, but where are the Mormon apologists who argue that we *should* exalt rationality above the precepts of Christian living? I am not aware of any.

Payne may not be pointing fingers but simply trying to raise awareness of a need for balance. While acknowledging a need for an intellectual approach, he calls for well-researched, substantive arguments that treat the claims of our critics fairly and honestly. At the same time, he stresses a need to shepherd our brothers and sisters toward Christ. He promotes a focus on underlying principles and broad meaning but counsels against using this “practice to avoid directly addressing difficult questions” (p. 264). By promoting a concept of “pastoral apologetics” and suggesting that we should strike an appropriate balance in our approach, Payne provides a reminder of what is at stake: We do not seek merely to win a war of ideas. We seek to win souls for Christ.

Conclusion

Perspectives on Mormon Theology: Apologetics is heavily weighted toward negative perspectives of Mormon apologetics. Of the 15 chapters, only those by Peterson, Ash, and Hancock defend apologetics directly. Rappleye offers a positive analysis of some results of apologetics, and Fiona Givens actually engages in apologetics. The remaining ten chapters criticize Mormon apologetics in various ways, sometimes quite harshly, including the claims that apologists ignore evidence, rely too heavily on evidence, or do not include enough women among their ranks. It seems as though this volume was not compiled in order to illuminate the history and explore the practice of Mormon apologetics so much as to convince those involved in Mormon studies that it would be best to avoid using their academic training to defend the Church and, perhaps, to convince all readers that they should avoid using apologetics in their study and sharing of the gospel. Apologetics is purported to be a futile, even a dangerous, enterprise. The unstated but potent subtext of social

pressure informs those who wish to fit in and be accepted in the field of Mormon studies that they should hide their apologetic lights under a bushel, if they do not snuff them out altogether.

A few positive articles appear in the volume, but these few essays do not entirely salvage what may have otherwise been a very important contribution to the study of Mormon theology. It would have been marvelous to see a book that explored the history of Mormon apologetics, the variety of topics that have been addressed, the way in which critics have responded to apologetic arguments, and more important, the way in which apologetics has affected the lives of ordinary Mormons.²⁴ Unfortunately, we must still await such a volume.

Having at least one editor who did not share the biases and priorities of secular Mormon studies might have pushed those who offered negative evaluations to justify the claims made only by assertion or to deal with some of the issues to which I have tried to draw attention in this review. Ericson and Van Dyke, the two editors, both contributed essays that evaluated apologetics negatively — and it is perhaps not surprising that the gaps in their analyses matched each other's and the other negative articles which they included. It would seem that believing apologists are not the only ones at risk of blind spots and unexamined or unchallenged assumptions.

In conclusion, I must acknowledge that my own testimony of the Church does not depend on academic arguments. As I encounter intellectual problems for which I do not have an immediate response, I usually study the matter further and sometimes must put the matter aside as I patiently wait to find the answer. Such challenges have not destroyed my faith because my faith is based on more than mere scholarship. However, if the gospel made no sense to me, if no scholarly evidences supported it, I think it would be very hard to maintain my faith. I am therefore deeply grateful for supporting evidence, scholarly responses to the critics, and the work of apologists.

24. The FairMormon website includes a few messages from patrons of the site who share their appreciation for the site and the information it offers. It would be very interesting to explore the experiences of people such as these who claim to have been spiritually strengthened by the scholarship provided by the FairMormon apologists. See *Testimonials*, FairMormon, retrieved August 30, 2017, <https://www.fairmormon.org/about/testimonials>.

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