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Defending the King and His Kingdom

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DEFENDING THE KING AND HIS KINGDOM

Louis C. Midgley

Again, if the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle?

1 Corinthians 14:8 NIV

Abstract: Some vocal cultural Mormons, busy asking themselves “why stay,” claim that it is not at all probable that there is a God, or that there even was a Jesus of Nazareth. They also ridicule the Atonement. In the language of our scriptures they are antichrists—that is, they deny that there was or is a Christ. Being thus against the King and His Kingdom, their trumpet does not give a clear sound; they are clearly against the one whom they made a solemn covenant to defend and sustain. Instead of seeking diligently to become genuine Holy Ones or Saints, they worship an idol—they have turned from the Way by fashioning an idol. They preach and practice a petty idolatry. Genuine Saints, including disciple-scholars, have a duty to defend the King and His Kingdom.

I must confess, while still flush with an idealism common to at least some naive young people, I was once an ardent supporter of *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*. The reason is that I was pleased at the prospect of what I hoped would be a genuine Latter-day Saint academic journal—a venue in which those whom Elder Neal A. Maxwell would later call disciple-scholars¹ would use whatever gifts they might have to defend

1. For an essay by Elder Maxwell, see his essay entitled “The Disciple-Scholar,” *Learning in the Light of Faith: The Compatibility of Scholarship and*

the King and build His Kingdom. I must also admit that, alas, I was soon disillusioned by this and some other similar publishing ventures. I began searching for appropriate venues. I had reasons for doing this. I believe that for the Saints not to defend and sustain the King and His Kingdom would be a serious violation of a sacred covenant, and hence offensive in the sight of God. In addition, Elder Maxwell earnestly appealed for true devotion to the Lord, which he insisted must be coupled with genuine humility, especially for those who aspire to become Latter-day Saint scholars. He made discipleship (and not quirky criticism or chronic complaining) qualify the word *scholar*. He was clearly calling for consecrated discipleship from those seeking to be sanctified scholar-Saints.

Being a Saint or . . .

When not busy describing ourselves as Mormons, we identify ourselves as Saints. Being known as a Latter-day Saint closely follows the pattern set down among those who in the primitive church chose to follow Jesus of Nazareth. They were originally part of what was called the “way” (see Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14).² Those who followed the *way* set out by the Lord (YHWH) during his ministry—the straight and narrow *way*—were known as Saints. (The Greek word *hagioi*, translated as “saints” in KJV English, means “holy ones”—that is, those who both seek and manifest in word and deed some measure of sanctification that sets them apart from the ordinary, profane world.) The first Saints were those in the primitive church who chose to *remember* and *keep* the covenant they had made with God. Following the restoration of priesthood keys to and then through Joseph Smith, the same has been true in this dispensa-

Discipleship, ed. Henry B. Eyring (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1999), 1–18.

2. This usage fits nicely with Christ’s own wording in John 14:6.

tion. Those who now have made and strive to *remember*³ their covenants are those for whom Jesus is the real King—that is, both Lord and merciful Redeemer from both temporal and spiritual death.

The apostle Paul insisted that even or especially those Gentiles who may have previously been without God (*atheos*) “are no longer strangers and aliens, but . . . are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God” (Ephesians 2:19 NRSV). The Saints are also urged to “Sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a *defense* to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you” (1 Peter 3:15 NASB). Please note that the English word *defense*, which I have emphasized in this famous passage, is the Greek word *apologia*, meaning “to vindicate or defend”—that is, to give reasons or evidence (as in giving testimony before a court of law). In this case it means giving reasons for one’s faith in the King in whom one has placed one’s trust (or faith). Hence all genuine Saints are (or should be) apologists for their faith. Peter properly admonishes that this should be done “with gentleness and reserve,” thereby keeping “a good conscience, so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame” (3 Peter 3:15–16 NASB). Please note that this necessary restraint does not absolve the Latter-day Saint from the necessity of defending the King and His Kingdom. There is nothing in our scriptures that calls for scholar-Saints to merely seek to promote mutual respect and goodwill among people of all faiths, as worthy as that goal might be. Instead, sustaining and defending the

3. On the crucial link between remembering and keeping, see Louis Midgley, “Preserving and Enlarging the Memory of the Saints,” *FARMS Review* 19/2 (2007): 21–24, especially nn.1, 2. For some of the additional literature on the ways of remembrance in the Bible and Book of Mormon, see also Louis Midgley and Gary Novak, “Remembrance and the Past,” *FARMS Review* 19/2 (2007): 37–66.

Kingdom of God and hence the faith of the Saints is required from all in the sacred covenants made with the Lord.

It seems that those who followed the *way* of the Lord later came to be known as “Christians” in much the same way that soon after 1830 the label *Mormon* came to identify the members of the fledgling Church of Christ. Both of those labels were originally derisive nicknames for those who follow the *way* of the King, whose obedient servant/slave a faithful disciple must be.⁴ In addition, those opposed to the new covenant people of God—the often despised Mormons—were also soon calling themselves *anti-Mormons* (the prefix *anti-* being the common way in English of signaling that someone is against or opposed to something).⁵

This same dynamic also explains why the label *antichrist* turns up in letters in the New Testament (1 John 2:18–26; 4:1–6; compare 2 John 1:7–15), where it is said that there were those who had gone “out from us” because “they did not belong to us; for if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us. But by going out they made it plain that none of them belongs to us” (1 John 2:19 NRSV). Some on the fringes of the primitive church were antichrists because they denied that the Lord (even YHWH) had come in the flesh to vindicate Israel by opening the *way* leading to life and light (John 14:6).⁶

4. The Greek word *doulos* actually means “slave.” Hence one can be a “slave to sin” (Romans 6:16–17 NIV), from which one is freed by faith (trust) in Jesus Christ, even though one then becomes a slave of Jesus Christ (see Romans 1:1; Galatians 1:10; Philippians 1:1 NASB). Being a slave to Jesus Christ and trusting His gospel obliges disciples to minister to the wants and needs of others as an act of love for the new Master, who may justify and thereby include faithful servants in His own family (or household).

5. For a detailed defense of the propriety of the labels *anti-Mormon* and *anti-Mormonism* in classifying especially strident critics and criticisms of the faith of Latter-day Saints, see Louis Midgley, “The Signature Books Saga,” *FARMS Review* 16/1 (2004): 403.

6. Later, however, Christians began to identify a beast who would challenge God at the end times, and so we have a mythology of a demonic public figure

The King by both His words and deeds has made redemption from death available for all, and redemption from sin available for those who genuinely turn to Him for mercy. He did this by meekly allowing Himself to be killed by the then most visible demonic powers, after which He vanquished all such powers both on earth and in heaven by rising triumphant-ly from the grave. The now-enthroned King called His followers to seek righteousness and receive sanctification. This is at the heart of Christ's gospel (see 1 John 1:5; 3:11–16). The condition for citizenship in the Kingdom of God is that one must genuinely seek and accept sanctification by undergoing what is sometimes called the baptism of fire or of the Holy Spirit (see Matthew 3:11, and compare 2 Nephi 31:13, 14; D&C 20:41; 33:11; 39:6).

The departure of many from the primitive community of Saints showed that they were not genuinely the covenant people (or household) of God; they belonged instead to what is described as the world (or the evil, falsehood, and darkness of the age), thus remaining in carnal bondage to sin. Those who have turned away from the Lord often deny that there is sin (1 John 1:8, 10), though they might grant that there are mistakes, shortcomings, or miscalculations in seeking pleasure. The faithful turn to God and confess their sins—understood as offenses against God—and seek the companionship of the Holy Spirit and thereby the service of an Advocate with the Father. The death and subsequent resurrection of Jesus marked the victory over death and also the liberation of sin-laden souls from their previous bondage (on condition of faithfulness to Him as their King). The sign of being one with Christ (or loving God) is faith and faithfulness in keeping His commandments (1 John 2:3)

who will suddenly turn up and usher in the final scene of world history. This has led to much bizarre speculation.

and following his example of selfless love thus living as Jesus did, fully obedient to His (and our) Father (1 John 2:6).⁷

There are ultimately only two worlds and hence only two ways—that of light and a fullness of life and that of darkness and spiritual death, between which there is an inevitable clash taking place here below. The ancient war in heaven goes on around us and in our own souls as we struggle with temptations and doubts. But Jesus’s true disciples can be of good cheer since His victory over the demonic powers has made available light and life and righteousness in the eyes of God through faith and faithful obedience. Paul’s famous salutation “grace and peace” is the right way to see the heavenly gifts available to us. There can be no compromise with the darkness of this world. The Messiah (or Christ) has won a decisive victory over the world (1 John 2:12–14).⁸

Turning Away from God

A glance at the Internet shows a host of people filled with malice and even hatred toward the King and His Kingdom. Latter-day Saints currently encounter an array of striking examples of this on message boards and in podcasts. Hence here and now—just as then and there—unfortunately there are Saints who have gone missing. The most troublesome of these are in the business trying to pull the community of Saints from its crucial historical foundations and thereby offering reasons for their not remaining faithful to their covenants with God. They constitute a new generation of “alternate voices” against

7. What constitutes such love is partly defined in 1 John 3:17–18, and more fully explained elsewhere in the scriptures.

8. In this context *world* denotes not the created order of the earth (or the entire cosmos) but that which challenges the light, life, and righteousness of those desiring to be genuine Saints.

which Elder Dallin H. Oaks once warned the Saints.⁹ Going far beyond rejecting Joseph Smith's prophetic ministry or the Book of Mormon, they deny that Jesus is the Messiah (or Christ), or they brush aside or ridicule the notion that he carried out an expiation for sin with a final victory over every kind of death. (Some may even question or deny that there ever was such a person as Jesus of Nazareth. I will say more on this later.)

In the Book of Mormon, Korihor, one of those who challenged the doctrine of Christ, is described as an antichrist because "he began to preach unto the people against the prophecies which had been spoken by the prophets, concerning the coming of Christ" (Alma 30:6; see also v. 12). He described belief in Christ as an unnecessary bondage to "a foolish and a vain hope" (Alma 30:13). Sherem also insisted "that there should be no Christ" (Jacob 7:1) and sought to "overthrow the doctrine of Christ" (Jacob 7:2), though he is not explicitly labeled an antichrist and may not, much like some recent exemplars of such a stance, have identified himself as such. With some now boasting that they see no reason for faith in God or little reason for believing that there even was a Jesus of Nazareth, it seems odd to me that one so clearly against the doctrine of Christ would not be proud to carry the label *anti-Mormon* as the badge of their new aggressive *unfaith*. By the same token, why would an inveterate critic of the Church of Jesus Christ not insist on being known as *anti-Mormon*, unless he is covertly trying to spread his ideology among the community of Saints?

Green Cheese Anyone?

If the label *antichrist* were not so profoundly potent so as to make the Saints uncomfortable, thus preventing its use even when fully justified, it would seem to fit those who

9. For Elder Oaks remarks, see his "Alternate Voices," *Ensign*, May 1989, 27-30.

currently insist that there was no resurrected Christ because there is very little probability that there even was a Jesus of Nazareth. (If there was no historical Jesus, then what we call the Atonement makes no sense at all.) That there are people who have profoundly scrubbed Jesus from history may come as something of a surprise to most Latter-day Saints. However, there are some cultural Mormons and their secular associates who now hold this opinion.

Inhabiting certain Internet boards, producing podcasts or publishing books are those who, in addition to mocking the founding narrative upon which the faith of the Saints rests, also insist that the Jesus Christians worship never existed. One of these, Robert M. Price, a favorite of certain cultural Mormons, describes himself as a “Christian atheist.”¹⁰ But even among the most radical New Testament scholars (e.g., the so-called Jesus Seminar), those who insist that there is no reliable textual evidence of a Jesus of Nazareth are marginal figures who operate with their own cant in a bizarre underworld.

N. T. Wright, currently the leading New Testament scholar, tells the following story in which he sets out his witty response to a book by two such authors.¹¹ Wright indicates that he received

a phone call from the BBC’s flagship “Today” programme: would I go on air on Good Friday morning to debate with the authors of a new book, *The Jesus Mysteries*? The book claims (so they told me) that everything in the Gospels reflects, because it was in fact

10. See Louis Midgley, “Atheist Piety: A Religion of Dogmatic Dubiety,” *Interpreter* 1 (2012): 111–43 at 123–30; and Midgley, review of Price’s 2011 collection of essays entitled *Latter-day Scripture: Studies in the Book of Mormon*, in *Interpreter* 1 (2012): 145–50, at <http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/journal/volume-1-2012/>.

11. See Timothy Freke and Peter Gandy, *The Jesus Mysteries: Was the “Original Jesus” a Pagan God?* (New York: Three Rivers, 2001). This is the American and not the British imprint of this book.

borrowed from, much older pagan myths; that Jesus never existed; that the early church knew it was propagating a new version of an old myth; and that the developed church covered this up in the interests of its own power and control. The producer was friendly, and took my point when I said that this was like asking a professional astronomer to debate with the authors of a book claiming the moon was made of green cheese.¹²

Another New Testament scholar asks,

What about those writers like . . . Timothy Freke & Peter Gandy (*The Jesus Mysteries*), who say that Jesus never existed, and that Christianity was an invented religion, the Jewish equivalent of the Greek mystery religions? This is an old argument, even though it shows up every 10 years or so. This current craze argues that Christianity was a mystery religion like these other mystery religions. The people who are saying this are almost always people who know nothing about the mystery religions; they've read a few popular books, but they're not scholars of mystery religions. The reality is, we know very little about mystery religions—the whole point of mystery religions is that they're secret! So I think it's crazy to build on ignorance in order to make a claim like this. I think the evidence is just so overwhelming that Jesus existed, that it's silly to talk about him not existing. I don't know anyone who is

12. N. T. Wright, "Jesus' Self-Understanding," in *The Incarnation*, ed. Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall, and Gerald O'Collins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 48. This has become a popular anecdote. See, for example, Paul R. Eddy and Gregory A. Boyd, *The Jesus Legend: A Case for the Historical Reliability of the Synoptic Jesus Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 165, where they report that when "the BBC approached N. T. Wright, asking him to comment on *The Jesus Mysteries*, Wright indicated that 'this was like asking a professional astronomer to debate with the authors of a book claiming the moon was made of green cheese.'"

a responsible historian, who is actually trained in the historical method, or anybody who is a biblical scholar who does this for a living, who gives any credence at all to any of this.¹³

And still another New Testament scholar points out that

the very logic that tells us there was no Jesus is the same logic that pleads that there was no Holocaust. On such logic, history is no longer possible. It is no surprise then that there is *no* New Testament scholar drawing pay from a post who doubts the existence of Jesus. I know not one. His birth, life, and death in first-century Palestine have never been subject to serious question . . . among those who are experts in the field. The existence of Jesus is a given.¹⁴

Has the Jesus-myth ideology had any impact on Latter-day Saints? Probably not, since most of the Saints who go missing do so for other than genuinely intellectual reasons. Their stereotyped exit-stories indicate that they look for intellectual support for their rejection of their faith only after they have made the decision not to be faithful to their covenants. However, those who, for whatever reason, have turned Joseph Smith into a liar and/or lunatic, and the Book of Mormon into a tale fabricated from ideas floating around his immediate environment, also seem to be tempted to see the accounts of Jesus in a somewhat similar light. Some of what is available on podcasts, blogs, and message boards indicates that some disaffected Saints now entertain the opinion that there was never a Jesus of Nazareth.

13. Craig A. Evans, *Fabricating Jesus: How Modern Scholars Distort the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008), 25.

14. Nicholas Perrin, *Lost in Transmission?: What We Can Know about the Words of Jesus* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 32. See also Bart D. Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist? The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012).

Removing the divine entirely from history also necessarily removes the last vestiges of hope one could have that the Holy One of Israel won a victory over the awful monster death and hell. Those who succumb to an atheist ideology also jettison all hope for genuine meaning to their endeavors. From my perspective, their trumpet gives a very uncertain sound.

A Publishing Renaissance

My early disillusionment with several publishing venues rested on the realization that they fostered what later came to be called “alternate voices.” They became for me simply irrelevant. I longed for a venue in which I could use whatever scholarly gifts I might have to defend the faith and the Saints. Beginning in 1980, I made a conscious choice to make my scholarship strictly devotional (a kind of scholarly enterprise that Elder Maxwell called a form of worship and that, in the language of the scriptures, is one means of finding favor in the sight of God). Had I not, I reasoned, made a covenant to consecrate my efforts to sustain the Kingdom and hence also defend the King?

Such a venue eventually came on the scene in 1989 when Professor Daniel C. Peterson launched a publication dedicated to, among other things, defending the Book of Mormon. Beginning twenty-three years ago, I found an enchanted means of spending whatever intellectual gifts I might have defending the faith of the Saints. Be that as it may, Professor Peterson’s earlier seemingly offbeat publishing adventure¹⁵ immediately became the primary venue for solid Latter-day Saint scholarship defending the Book of Mormon, and it soon morphed into

15. For Professor Peterson’s enlightening and also amusing account of the first twenty-two years of the *Review*, see his essay entitled “‘To Cheer, to Raise, to Guide’: 22 Years of the *FARMS Review*,” *Mormon Studies Review* 23/1 (2011): vii–xvii.

a venue for those willing and able to defend the Church of Jesus Christ.

Latter-day Saints have, of course, responded to attacks on the faith and the Saints. The following are some examples of this literature:

- seriously flawed accounts of the crucial generative events upon which the faith of the Saints must necessarily rest,¹⁶
- two recent efforts to revive versions of long-moribund explanations of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon.¹⁷
- flawed science to attack the Book of Mormon,¹⁸
- other efforts to explain away the Book of Mormon,¹⁹

16. For responses to Dan Vogel, ed., *The Word of God: Essays on Mormon Scripture*, see Louis Midgley, “More Revisionist Legerdemain and the Book of Mormon,” *FARMS Review* 3/1 (1991): 261–311; and Stephen E. Robinson, *FARMS Review* 3/1 (1991): 312–18. For responses to Vogel’s *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet*, see Larry E. Morris, “‘The Private Character of the Man Who Bore That Testimony’: Oliver Cowdery and His Critics,” *FARMS Review* 15/1 (2003): 311–51; Kevin Christensen, “Truth and Method: Reflections on Dan Vogel’s Approach to the Book of Mormon,” *FARMS Review* 16/1 (2004): 287–54; and Alan Goff, “Dan Vogel’s Family Romance and the Book of Mormon as Smith Family Allegory,” *FARMS Review* 17/2 (2005): 321–400.

17. For responses to a recent effort to revive the Spalding theory, see Matthew Roper, “The Mythical ‘Manuscript Found,’” *FARMS Review* 17/2 (2005): 7–140; and Roper, “Myth, Memory, and ‘Manuscript Found,’” *FARMS Review* 21/2 (2009): 179–223.

18. For responses to the claim that DNA studies have demonstrated that the Book of Mormon cannot be an authentic history, see Michael F. Whiting, “DNA and the Book of Mormon: A Phylogenetic Perspective,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 12/1 (2000): 24–35; John M. Butler, “A Few Thoughts from a Believing DNA Scientist,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 12/1 (2003): 36–37; D. Jeffrey Meldrum and Trent D. Stephens, “Who Are the Children of Lehi?,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 12/1 (2003): 38–51; David A. McClellan, “Detecting Lehi’s Genetic Signature: Possible, Probable, or Not?,” *FARMS Review* 15/2 (2003): 35–90; and Butler, “Addressing Questions surrounding the Book of Mormon and DNA Research,” *FARMS Review* 18/1 (2006): 101–8.

19. For a crushing refutation of a flawed effort to use stylometry to refute the Book of Mormon, see Paul J. Fields, G. Bruce Schaallje, and Matthew Roper, “Examining a Misapplication of Nearest Shrunken Centroid Classification to Investigate Book of Mormon Authorship,” *Mormon Studies Review* 23/1 (2011):

- a noxious and bizarre claim from one presumably an “insider” that Joseph Smith was a fraud,²⁰
- and, in addition to attacks on the Book of Mormon by its critics, some very bad science used to sell a fanciful geography.²¹

None of these (and many dozens of other similar essays) are, by any stretch of the imagination, “hit pieces,” nor are they personal attacks on anyone, and they do not employ fallacious *ad hominem* arguments. Such unsubstantiated charges are diversionary efforts that replace solid arguments and supporting evidence with bald assertions and sarcasm. *Interpreter* now seems poised to become a fine source for both intellectual and spiritual nourishment, and as such it will genuinely honor Elder Maxwell. The existence of *Interpreter* dedicated to explicating and defending the Mormon scriptures provides solid evidence of Latter-day Saint disciple-scholars willing to defend the King and His Kingdom.

87–111; and Roper and Fields, “The Historical Case against Sidney Rigdon’s Authorship of the Book of Mormon,” *Mormon Studies Review* 23/1 (2011): 113–25.

20. For devastating reviews of Grant Palmer, *An Insider’s View of Mormon Origins*, see Davis Bitton, “The Charge of a Man with a Broken Lance (But Look What He Doesn’t Tell Us),” *FARMS Review* 15/2 (2003): 257–72; Steven C. Harper, “Trustworthy History?,” *FARMS Review* 15/2 (2003): 273–308; Mark Ashurst-McGee, “A Onesided View of Mormon Origins,” *FARMS Review* 15/2 (2003): 364; Louis Midgley, “Prying into Palmer,” *FARMS Review* 15/2 (2003): 365–410; and James B. Allen, “Asked and Answered: A Response to Grant H. Palmer,” *FARMS Review* 16/1 (2004): 235–86.

21. For a response to Rodney Meldrum’s *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon Remnant through DNA*, see Gregory L. Smith, “Often in Error, Seldom in Doubt: Rod Meldrum and Book of Mormon DNA” *FARMS Review* 22/1 (2010): 17–161; for a response to Bruce H. Porter and Rodney Meldrum, *Prophecies and Promises: The Book of Mormon and the United States of America*, see Matthew Roper, “Joseph Smith, Revelation, and Book of Mormon Geography,” *FARMS Review* 22/2 (2010): 15–85. And for a review by a geneticist of the relevant literature on DNA and the Book of Mormon, see Ugo Perego, “The Book of Mormon and the Origin of Native Americans from a Maternally Inherited DNA Standpoint,” *FARMS Review* 22/1 (2010): 191–227.

Cultural Mormons wrongly believe that the faith of the Saints cannot be defended, while some Saints insist that it should not be defended. It seems that they both have a Mormon version of what is sometimes called *Judischer Selbsthaß* (Jewish self-hatred)—that is, an embarrassment at things Jewish because they are seen as both parochial and unnecessarily limiting. Something like this can be seen among cultural Mormons on various blogs, boards, and lists, or set out in podcasts in which disdain is expressed for embarrassing parochial concerns like testifying to or defending the faith of the Saints.

However, critics of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon seem to know that an effective defense of the faith is actually taking place. The unseemly invective directed especially at Professor Peterson by shady and anonymous former or cultural Mormons (some of whom self-identify as New Order Mormons or use similar labels in an effort to provide a kind of surrogate Internet community or “church”) is actually solid evidence of the effectiveness of the defense of the faith and the Saints. If this were not so, critics would be insisting that faithful Saints read what those they denigrate as apologists publish, rather than doing their best to censor what is published²² or otherwise discredit its contents.

There is currently some opposition to a defense of the faith on the grounds that engaging in such an undertaking constitutes dreaded “apologetics.” The unexamined background assumption is that Latter-day Saint “apologists” fib and hide the past, while real scholars are presumably neutral, detached, balanced, and objective.²³ But the fact is that this way of seeing the situation rests on an obvious mistake. How so? Those who hold

22. The story of efforts to invoke censorship has yet to be told.

23. An instructive example is the apologia offered by Mark D. Thomas for his own efforts to explain away the Book of Mormon as merely some theological speculation by Joseph Smith. For details, see Midgley, “Atheist Piety: A Religion of Dogmatic Dubiety,” *Interpreter* 1 (2012): 125–27, 137.

any opinion, if they are at all rational, at least to themselves, if not in public, will attempt to defend it as well as they can. Thus everyone is an apologist for those things they believe, even if it is merely their favorite sports team or beverage. Hence the question is not whether one is an apologist, but only what one is willing to defend and then how well one can do it. Appeals to so-called objectivity, especially when accounting for faith in God, or doing history, invoke a myth grounded on deep confusion about what is entailed in writing about such matters. Put another way, those who appeal to neutrality, balance, or objectivity are deceiving themselves and also their audience.²⁴

From sectarian and secular critics of the church, and from some on the outer margins of the LDS intellectual world, one finds the complaint that scholarly Latter-day Saint efforts to defend the faith are merely so-called hit pieces—essentially personal or *ad hominem* attacks, rather than essays and reviews addressing genuine intellectual issues. Such assertions are flatly false; they are intended to discredit, without providing evidence and arguments, all efforts to defend the King and His Kingdom.

Making the Correct Delineation by Avoiding Idolatry

The Saints face doubts along their faith journey. The reason is that the choice to put our full trust in God and become His loving, faithfully obedient servants, and thereby enter into a world in which divine things are present in what otherwise is a world barren of ultimate meaning, necessarily comes before we have much understanding of either the natural world or solid grasp of the history of human things. So we all can expect to face a crisis of faith. A crisis is, of course, a turning point when a decision is made for better or worse—that is, the point at which

24. For a detailed treatment of this issue, see Louis Midgley, “Knowing Brother Joseph Again,” *FARMS Review* 18/1 (2006): xiv–lx.

one affirms whether they will go onward or turn away. The fact is that we all face many such choices. It is often, however, such a crisis that brings people to genuine faith in Jesus Christ. Be that as it may, such decisions are essentially moral and not merely intellectual. They are never fully informed choices. God is not testing our intellect, and He is not on trial, which is our lot in life. The Lord does not force us to enter His Kingdom, but he invites us to come willingly to feast at his table and thereby nurture the seed of faith. We are here on probation and hence are both being tested and, if we are willing, taught line upon line.

Even though the final victory over demonic forces was won by Jesus of Nazareth, the war in heaven is not over. This victory over demonic powers was not with armies and firepower, as perhaps even the close disciples of Jesus may have expected, but with meekness, mercy, and love. But for us this war still continues. We can sense this is the case if we are honest about what goes on within our own souls. We all struggle with temptation and hence always need to repent. The victory over both physical and spiritual death is for mortals “already but not quite yet,” since Jesus was resurrected and thereby completed the Atonement, and yet here and now we remain on probation. We must remain true and faithful to be cleansed, purified, purged and eventually sanctified through what our scriptures call the baptism of fire (or of the Holy Spirit). For this to happen we must be genuine Saints and not merely cultural Mormons.²⁵ But from the perspective of those who scorn and mock, faith in God is a rude scandal, perhaps explained away as delusional or illusional.

The truly terrible moral evils that we see around us or that tempt us are the product of common and insidious forms of

25. These are currently identified by such labels such as New Order-, Uncorrelated-, Internet-, Never-, DNA-, and Post-, Former-, or so-called Recovering Mormons. If the Saints insist on employing the label *Mormon*, the word should identify genuine faith in God and it should not be used to position oneself in opposition to the faith of the Saints.

idolatry. Our scriptures warn us of our urge to fashion our own gods with which we justify our avarice and ambition, as well as our carnality and self-righteousness—vices that are often driven by base mercenary motives, the desire for power, or the lusts of the flesh and so forth, or the devastating but seemingly less overtly demonic temptation to focus our lives on such things as golf or gardening and not on God. People who will not listen to the Lord, and especially those who knowingly stray from ordinances and break solemn covenants, “seek not the Lord to establish his righteousness, but . . . [walk] in their own way, and after the image of [their] own god, whose image is in the likeness of the world, and whose substance is that of an idol” (D&C 1:16). Idolatry is therefore not something that merely afflicts primitive people with icons. When our hearts are upon our treasures, then our treasure, whatever it might be, becomes our god (see 2 Nephi 9:30).

As responsible moral agents, we must choose to either put our trust in God or follow the easier “broad way” (Matthew 7:13). We are all being tested by God to see if we will trust Him and follow His *way*, and not to see how clever we are in figuring out human and divine things. Faith is, of course, possible only with some awareness of the alternatives and their moral implications. While here on probation the Saints live by faith and not by sight. But the decision to covenant with God, then to remain faithful to those covenants, and to renew them often is not made in the light of full knowledge and absolute certainty. It is a mistake to hold that we need a final proof before we nurture the seed of faith and begin to grow the tree of life in the hope of eventually tasting (or becoming) its delicious fruit (see Alma 32:26–43). Nurturing faith requires choices about what one most ardently hopes to be a manner of life that will find favor in the sight of the Lord and bring blessings to the one making such decisions, as well as to the community of Saints.

Of course no one wants the grounds or contents of their faith to be merely wishful thinking. This explains why we all look for confirmation that we are following the right *way* in our journey here below. In approaching sources of information and modes of understanding we should question whether our doubts have gone far or deep enough. The questions we entertain should be driven through the solvent of radical doubt about our own abilities, unaided, to fathom much of anything with any real confidence, given the intellectual trends that surround us (the source and history of which we hardly understand) and the socializing that often takes the form of mockery or flattery. Hence honest doubts especially about ourselves and our grasp of both this world and divine things can open the heart and mind to the possibility of genuine faith and open for us an enchanted and enchanting world in which we can participate if and only if we are not the center of attention but fellow citizens in a community governed by love. Those who seek the Kingdom of God must be willing to testify in both word and deed—that is, to defend and sustain the King and His Kingdom as well as they possibly can. We all should answer the clear call of the trumpet of the Lord, and not be toying with the silly question “why stay”?

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