

*Perspectives on
Mormon Theology*

Apologetics

Edited by
Blair G. Van Dyke
and Loyd Isao Ericson

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Mormon Theology*

PERSPECTIVES ON MORMON THEOLOGY

PERSPECTIVES ON MORMON THEOLOGY is designed to facilitate and advance the academic study of Latter-day Saint thought. As Mormon Studies continues to develop as an academic field, there is increasing demand for scholarship that engages theological studies and the philosophy of religion. This series is a response to this need and is designed to provide interested readers additional resources in understanding this rich and intriguing religious tradition. Each volume engages a specific theological topic and exhibits a variety of perspectives in the topic area. The series is not intended to defend any particular position, but rather to provide a forum within which a range of approaches and methodologies are given voice.

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GREG KOFFORD BOOKS
SALT LAKE CITY, 2017

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Cover design by Loyd Isao Ericson

Published in the USA.

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Greg Kofford Books
P.O. Box 1362
Draper, UT 84020
www.gregkofford.com
facebook.com/gkbooks

Also available in ebook.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

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PREFACE

A Brief Introduction and Orientation

This volume is an exploration of theology and, to a lesser degree, the practical engagement of Mormon apologetics—or defense of the faith—in the twenty-first century. Given the mix of spiritualism, personal revelation, communalism, strong ecclesiastical hierarchy, an ongoing identity fettered to religious persecution, and a commission to defend, apologetics in Mormonism is part of the fabric of the tradition. The contributing authors in this volume constitute diverse voices in the field of apologetics, and their writings comprise an informative spectrum of thought. A brief overview of the organization of the chapters may be serviceable.

On the heels of Blair Van Dyke's introduction that provides a theological and historical backdrop for subsequent chapters, one finds groupings of authors that address apologetics at large. Daniel Peterson, Neal Rappleye, and Michael Ash consider the contributions of apologetics, including their usefulness and scope—an apologetic for apologetics if you will.

Juliann Reynolds, Julie Smith, and Fiona Givens consider women's voices—or the lack thereof—in Mormon apologetics. Their writings discuss the import of apologetics as an act of devotion, challenge the predominantly-male defenses of gendered roles and beliefs within the LDS tradition, and offer unique insights and apologetics of priesthood authority and feminine identity.

Ralph Hancock, Benjamin Park, and Brian Birch deliberate the role of apologetics in the academy. The boundaries of inclusion for defense of faith in scholarly circles is one of the most dynamic discussions surrounding apologetics in Mormonism—particularly as schools of higher education have become increasingly secular and ideologically left over the past decades. These debates in higher education frequently carry significant implications for the way apologists are received as scholars and often reflect viewpoints prevalent at the respective institutions. However, the dialogues and deliberations on the place of apologetics in the academy

are frequently conducted amongst insiders unbeknownst to Mormons at large. These authors present issues for any reader—academic or otherwise—to consider.

Lloyd Ericson, David Knowlton, and David Bokovoy offer varying criticisms of Mormon apologetics. They indict aspects of the endeavor for attempting to police and define the boundaries of faithfulness, failing to sufficiently depict the religious nature of Joseph Smith's restoration, and unnecessarily threatening the faith that apologists are supposed to defend.

Finally, Joseph Spencer and Spencer Payne, while offering their own criticisms of apologetics for occasionally rendering defenses that are not critical in thought or abandoning the very principles of Christian civility espoused by Mormonism, focus instead is on presenting their own visions of apologetics going forward.

As illustrated by the groupings above, there is no attempt to forge a common view of apologetics in this volume. This is as it should be since a sterilized rendering of the actual status of apologetics serves no one well. As editors we aimed to portray the breadth and width, the borders and boundaries of Mormon Apologetics, and thus intentionally employed limited editorial touch to allow readers the opportunity to encounter authors as they present themselves in their own style. This includes the possible use of rhetoric that some may find unnecessarily antagonistic—even inimical—which itself is an issue that is frequently discussed and debated (as it is in this volume). As such, the author's work is their own and readers are encouraged to engage each chapter critically.

Finally, we made every effort to bring diverging perspectives together in this way so that astute readers may observe the textures and contours of apologetics in Mormonism where deep theological and ideological fissures are sometimes manifest and vigorous disagreements are consistently on display. It is essential to note, however, that in spite of pressing differences, what each author has in common is a passion for Mormonism and how it is presented and defended. This volume captures that reality and allows readers to encounter the terrain of Mormon apologetics at close range.

Blair G. Van Dyke
Lloyd Isao Ericson

TWO

A Brief Defense of Apologetics

Daniel C. Peterson

“Apologetics” (from the Greek word ἀπολογία, “speaking in defense”) is the practice or discipline of defending a position (usually—but not always—a religious one) through the use of some combination or other of evidence and reason. In modern English, those who are known for defending their positions (often minority views) against criticism or attack are frequently termed “apologists.” In this essay, I will, unless I say otherwise, be using “apologetics” to refer to attempts to prove or defend religious claims. But the fact is that every argument defending any position, even a criticism of Latter-day Saint apologetics, is an apology.

Some people turn their noses up at the thought of apologetics. Apologists, they declare, are not concerned with truth; what apologists do isn’t real scholarship, and anyhow, some say, apologetics is a fundamentally unethical and immoral enterprise.

I disagree. Like any other intellectual undertaking, of course, apologetics can be done competently or incompetently, logically or illogically, honestly or not. But religious apologetics has a quite venerable tradition behind it, including such notable writers, scholars, and thinkers as Socrates, Plato, St. Justin Martyr, Origen of Alexandria, St. Augustine, al-Ghazālī, Ibn Rushd [Averroës], Moses Maimonides, St. Anselm, St. Thomas Aquinas, Hugo Grotius, John Locke, John Henry Newman, G. K. Chesterton, Ronald Knox, C. S. Lewis, Richard Swinburne, Alvin Plantinga, Peter Kreeft, Stephen Davis, N. T. Wright, and William Lane Craig. Summarily dismissing the apologetic writings of such men as fundamentally unethical and immoral, flatly irrational, and unworthy of academic respect strikes me as dubious, at best. Moreover, although the term *apologetics* has rarely been used within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Mormons have engaged in apologetics from the very beginning of the Restoration. (The brothers Parley and Orson Pratt,

Oliver Cowdery, Orson Spencer, John Taylor, B. H. Roberts, and Hugh Nibley represent some of the high points.)

Still, even some communicant members of the Church disdain apologetics. A few, for instance, seem to believe it inherently evil. They seem to use “apologetics” to mean “trying to defend the Church but doing so badly,” whether through incompetence, dishonesty, or mean-spiritedness. But, again, “apologetics,” as such, is a value-neutral term. Just like historical writing, carpentry, and cooking, apologetics can be done well or poorly. Apologists—like attorneys and scientists and field laborers—can be pleasant or unpleasant, humble or arrogant, honest or dishonest, fair or unfair, civil and polite, or nasty and insulting.

If it’s argued that apologetics promotes faith, a critic might respond that bad apologetics and “faith-promoting fictions,” even lies, can strengthen faith too. And this is undoubtedly correct. It is possible, in science and politics and every other field, to hold correct views for faulty reasons. Young Latter-day Saint missionaries have, for instance, sometimes used questionable stories and quirky arguments, often passed down from one missionary generation to another, to build and sustain faith in their investigators as well as in themselves. That’s one of the reasons why, for many decades now, they’ve been encouraged to use standard, Church-approved lesson plans in their work. Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are almost certainly not alone in circulating edifying myths and rumors; probably no group is immune to such things.

But this seems no adequate reason, in itself, to oppose the enterprise of supporting beliefs via evidence and argument. After all, in medicine, placebos sometimes help. Does that mean that there’s no value in real medicines or that medicine itself is worthless? Do bad philosophical arguments invalidate or discredit philosophy as a whole?

But most (if not all) bad apologetic arguments were once regarded by somebody, somewhere, as convincing. How can one be sure that a supposedly good apologetic argument is actually a good one and not a bad one? One must evaluate it as one evaluates any other form of reasoning from evidence, just as one distinguishes logically sound arguments from those that are not, and solid historical writing from poor or dishonest historiography. Most now-discredited scientific theories were once regarded as true by many if not all scientists. Catastrophism, the four bodily humors, the universal ether, stress-induced ulcers, steady-state cosmology, Lamarckianism, the Ptolemaic view of the solar system—all of these and many other now-abandoned scientific theories were, in their day, widely

accepted. Some, in fact, enjoyed overwhelming consensus support for many centuries.

But this doesn't invalidate science. And even though one cannot claim infallibility for anything produced by humans, we move forward with cautious faith—something that apologetics will never supplant. We take elevators high up into buildings constructed by fallible workers on the basis of plans developed by fallible architects, and we allow ourselves to be inoculated with medicines that can guarantee neither complete effectiveness nor even complete safety; we cannot pause life or stop the presses until we've attained absolute human certainty.

Room for Faith and Reason

A few members of the Church appear to reject apologetics in principle, regarding it as inevitably—no matter how charitably and competently it's done—more detrimental than beneficial. They seem to do so on the basis of something resembling fideism, the view that faith is independent of reason, and even that reason and faith are incompatible with each other.

Now, obviously, to treat God solely as a hypothesis, a conjecture, or a topic for discussion is very different from reverencing or submitting to God in a spirit of religious devotion. There are few if any for whom reason is sufficient without faith. Ideally, from the believer's perspective, God comes to be known in a personal I–Thou relationship, as an experienced challenge and as a comfort in times of sorrow, not merely as a chance to show off in a graduate seminar or, worse, to grandstand on an Internet message board. And many of those who know God in that way—certainly this must be true of simple, unlettered believers across Christendom and throughout its history—may neither need nor desire any further evidence. Moreover, most would agree—I certainly would—that it's impossible, using empirical methods, to prove the divine. And it's surely true that faith is best nurtured and sustained, not by immersion in clever arguments, but by the method outlined in Alma 32. Emulation of the Savior, loving service, faithful home and visiting teaching, generous fast offerings, earnest missionary work, prayerful communication—these are the fundamentally significant elements of a Christian life. Not everybody needs academic arguments in order to come to faith. And likely nobody would find such arguments sufficient by themselves.

For the vast majority of people, today as in premodern times, faith isn't a matter of reason or argumentation, but of hearing the testimonies

TWELVE

Conceptual Confusion and the Building of Stumbling Blocks of Faith

Loyd Isao Ericson

When discussing the role of apologetics in Mormon Studies the discourse usually turns into a debate concerning the *quality* of the scholarship used or the *tone* in which apologetics are done. Criticisms of apologetics generally then involve accusing apologists of lacking academic rigor or engaging in unbecoming polemics. Such accusations may certainly describe some, or even much, of Mormon apologetics—especially when done by novices or those without academic training. On the flip side, however, there are also many apologetic works that involve the highest quality of rigorous scholarship and are models of charitable dialogue. Departing from this standard debate over apologetics, the criticism that concerns me here is not one of quality of scholarship or tone; rather, it is my contention that the very act of participation in apologetics involves a confusion of what is being defended. That is, it affirms a mistaken conceptual assumption that religious claims are the sort of thing that can be defended or proven through fundamentally nonreligious, secular scholarship. Thus, I argue 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—blocks that may be tripped upon by others who have accepted the conceptual confusion.

As the preeminent Mormon apologist, Daniel C. Peterson correctly notes that, broadly speaking, “every argument defending any position . . .

is an apology.”¹ Thus, before going further, allow me to narrowly define a few terms. First, by “apologetics” I am specifically referring to *religious* apologetics—what Peterson defines as “attempts to prove or defend religious claims.”² To be even more specific, I am here defining “religious apologetics” as the “attempt to *utilize scholarship* to prove or defend religious claims.” Under this definition, an appeal to Mesoamerican scholarship in defense of the divinity of the Book of Mormon would fall under the definition of apologetics. However, a missionary testifying or witnessing to a skeptic in defense of the same would not be an example of apologetics.

Second, by “scholarship” I am referring broadly to secular studies exemplified in academia.³ Thus, “scholarship” may include studies in fields such as historical research and methodology, philosophy, biblical and textual studies, ancient languages, genetics, anthropology, and archaeology. It would not include whispers of the Spirit, burning bosoms, visions, or other subjective religious experiences.

What then is a “religious claim”? It is the final term that this essay will largely focus on. Returning to my definition, what does it mean to “utilize scholarship to prove or defend *religious claims*”? Why is doing so a result of confusion? And how does it contribute to building stumbling blocks of faith?

In his book *Religion and Friendly Fire*, D. Z. Phillips criticizes Christian apologists like Alvin Plantinga, William Lane Craig, and others who use philosophy to defend traditional Christian beliefs and western theology in general. His primary contention, as he explains in his preface, is that “apologetics is guilty of friendly fire when it says more than it knows.”⁴ What apologetics *say*, according to Phillips, is that religious beliefs can be

1. Daniel C. Peterson, “The Role of Apologetics in Mormon Studies,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 2 (2012): <http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/the-role-of-apologetics-in-mormon-studies/>. Peterson’s article was originally presented at the 2012 annual FairMormon Conference. A portion of his article is a response to what I believe is an unintentional misreading of my “Where Is the ‘Mormon’ in Mormon Studies,” *The Claremont Journal of Mormon Studies* 1, no. 1 (April 2011): 5–13.

2. Peterson, “Role of Apologetics.”

3. For the inherently secular nature of apologetics, see Joseph M. Spencer, “Apologetics Again—But This Time with Feeling,” *Peculiar People*, November 13, 2013, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/peculiarpeople/2013/11/apologetics-again-but-this-time-with-feeling/>.

4. D. Z. Phillips, *Religion and Friendly Fire* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate Publishing Co., 2004), xii.

proven or defended using the tools of philosophy and scholarship. What it fails to *know*, though, is that religious claims are not the sort of thing that can be proven or defended with those tools. Mormon apologetics, no matter how rigorous its scholarship may be, or no matter how civil it may be presented, suffers from this same problem. While apologists may believe they are defending the prophetic calling of Joseph Smith, the divinity of Restoration scripture, and so on, in doing so they are saying more than they know. They are, as Phillips puts it, contributing to fantasy. He writes,

I have suggested that fantasies have been sustained by the philosophical friends of religions [the apologists]. If such fantasies are then attacked by religion's despisers, it means that the defense and attack of religious beliefs alike become a kind of shadow-play that misses the reality. *There could not be such play, however, if the friends of religion had not determined the agenda that makes it possible.*⁵

He later adds,

It cannot be denied, of course, that the pervasive confusion I am referring to has been attacked by the enemies of religion. But the enemies see no alternative to it. *The friends of religion are the authors of what is attacked.* It is in that way . . . that religion becomes the victim of friendly fire.⁶

To better understand Phillips's point, let me turn to a couple of Mormon apologetic examples. In a 2014 internet exchange on apologetics, Blake Ostler defended its role, writing: "Apologetics is providing a defense—for instance, explaining that it is likely that Joseph Smith did not have sexual relations with any of his polyandrous wives or that there is evidence for the Book of Mormon (or arguments against it are unsound) and so forth." He later adds, "Some of the best apologetics in my view are like good scholarship and does its best to take an objective look at the issues."⁷

While Ostler does not make it explicit here, I believe it is safe to assume that his use of "apologetics" is, like Peterson's above, concerned with religious claims and not with simple brute facts of history and such. Thus, for apologists like Peterson and Ostler, a debate over Joseph Smith's sexual life is different than a debate over Thomas Jefferson's, and a debate over

5. *Ibid.*, 2; emphasis added.

6. *Ibid.*, 5; emphasis added.

7. See Ostler's comments in response to the pseudonymously authored "An Apologetics of Care," *Faith Promoting Rumor*, July 29, 2014, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/faithpromotingrumor/2014/07/an-apologetics-of-care/>. I concur with Ostler's view that the pseudonymous author's "'care apologetics' is not apologetics, it is just empathetic listening."

evidence of the Book of Mormon is different than a debate over Homer's *Odyssey*. While the pair of latter claims may be loosely construed as apologetics of scholarly theses, the former claims are religious apologetics of religious claims; that is, they are defending Joseph Smith as *a prophet of God* and the Book of Mormon as *the word of God*.

The problem with defending religious claims using the tools of scholarship is that claims such as “The Book of Mormon is the word of God” and “Joseph Smith is a prophet of God” are of a religious nature and are conceptually unrelated to claims about the Book of Mormon's historicity and Joseph Smith's sexual morality. By joining or establishing the assumption that these religious claims can be proven or defended by scholarly means, they are creating or adding to the “fantasy,” as Phillips calls it, that religious claims can be disproven and attacked by the very same means. They are joining hands with the critics they are opposing in their misguided understanding that religious claims stand or fall on secular historical, philosophical, or scientific argumentation.

By agreeing with their critics that scholarship can have something to say about the truthfulness of religious claims, apologetics is establishing (or at least supporting) potential, unnecessary, and misguided stumbling blocks to faith. It does this in two primary ways. First, given the ever-changing status of what is known through scholarship, by linking the supposed truth of a claim of scholarship to the truth of a religious claim (such as the Arabian peninsula place-name NHM being evidence of the divinity of the Book of Mormon⁸ or Eliza Snow's testimony of Smith's marriage to Fanny Alger as a defense of his prophethood⁹) they implicitly raise doubts of the latter if the former is disproven. An example of this is Thomas Ferguson, one of

⁸ See, for example, Neal Rappleye and Stephen O. Smoot, “Book of Mormon Evidence of the Arabian Peninsula,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 13, no. 4 (Fall 2004): 16–20; and Dan MacLennan, “The Arabian Peninsula,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 13, no. 4 (Fall 2004): 21–22.

⁹ See, for example, Eliza Snow, “The Testimony of Eliza Snow,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 13, no. 4 (Fall 2004): 23–24.

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