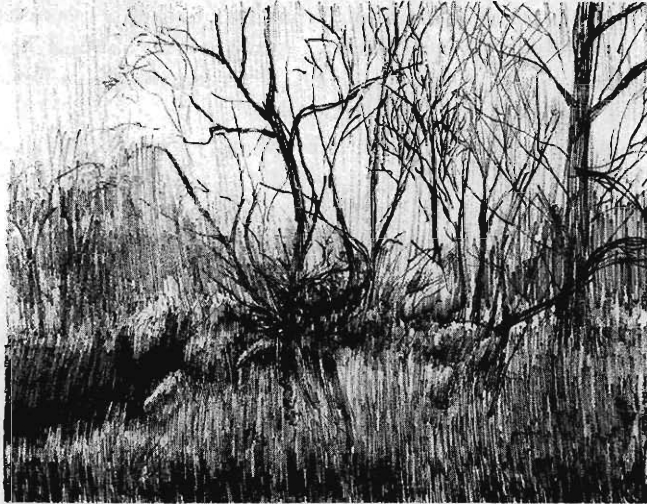


dence of the use of steel anywhere near that early. Undocumented assertion is no adequate substitute for evidence. Other interpretive arguments relevant to the problem (e.g., the variable meanings of the names of metals, or of animals) are completely neglected.

Despite the negative aspects of this review, I enjoyed the book and learned from it. Anyone who is seriously concerned with the Book of Mormon could similarly benefit. My discomfort develops from a wish that the book had been better—following up loose ends, expanding where hints and unexploited opportunities now leave the reader unsatisfied, and patching some of the holes (for example, the implications of continuing use of Egyptian records in Iron Age Palestine, or the time of the prophets in the chapter on the Brass Plates). But how easy it is to say, “Do a better job!” At least the book is here to be read. While many *Dialogue* readers no doubt feel no need for the kind of point-by-point apologetic defense of scripture Brother Sperry has provided, clearly other Mormons do. *Answers* offers them some usable help while they wait to hear from those of us who talk about but never write the perfect book!



## A QUESTION OF METHOD

Jay W. Butler

*Reasoning, Revelation—and You!* By James J. Unopulos, Jr. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1967. 406 pp. \$4.95. Jay W. Butler, a graduate of Harvard College and Columbia Law School, is Assistant Professor of Religious Instruction at Brigham Young University.

Ours, it seems, is a scientific age. We insist that “clinical tests confirm” the virtue of everything from toothpaste to dog food. Why not, therefore, religion? So it is that the author directs our attention to “the very similar truth-seeking methods employed by the Objective Scientist and the Religious Analyst” (p. 22; capitals in original). But to invoke science is not necessarily to employ it. It soon becomes clear that this work, which purports to be a reasoned analysis,

is in fact a polemic. James Unopulos is a man of powerful convictions; and those who can overlook the shortcomings of his style and method will find his testimony of the validity of Mormonism uplifting, even inspiring. Unfortunately, the author has not succeeded in matching the strength of his convictions with sound scholarship or cogent argument.

The author's premise is unobjectionable enough; it is, in effect, that religious principles, like those of the natural sciences, can and ought to be made the subjects of rational scrutiny and empirical research lest, through carelessness or deception, we arrive at false conclusions productive of harmful results. And, in light of the premise, the general outlines of the method proposed seem fairly adapted to test the doctrines of Mormonism: First, the author says, we perceive an apparent relation of prophecy and fulfillment between certain biblical predictions and the latter-day phenomenon of Mormonism. As a working hypothesis, he suggests, let us assume that Mormonism is, in fact, the fulfillment of biblical prophecy. To verify the hypothesis he proposes to subject each of certain distinctive characteristics of Mormonism to a three part test: Is it consistent with the Bible? Is it reasonable? Does it have beneficial effects?

If not identical, this method, the author seems to think, is at least closely analogous to that of the scientist, who also begins with a working hypothesis which he verifies with a similar test: Is it consistent with prior learning? Is it rationally self-consistent? Does it account for the observed data?

However that may be, it is apparent that in order for the method to work as applied to the validation of Mormonism, the author must apply the tests rigorously and honestly. This he has failed to do.

The test of consistency with the Bible raises particularly difficult problems. The Bible is a fragmentary record, or rather a collection of fragments, written by a variety of individuals over a period in excess of a millennium and a half, selected, assembled, and edited as one volume only substantially after the fact. It is not a systematic doctrinal treatise nor a comprehensive textbook of ecclesiastical practice. Even accepting the Bible to be "the word of God as far as it is translated correctly," it is clear that a convincing comparison of Mormonism with biblical doctrine and practice requires something more than the periodic invocation of isolated language of doubtful purport in support of this or that contemporary dogma. The true comparison for this purpose, one supposes, is between the ancient and modern perceptions of the relation between God and Man, of the principles that recur as dominant themes of the scriptural text, recognizable notwithstanding the particular language in which they are couched.

Unfortunately, the chapter entitled "Understanding of the Dignity and Destiny of Man," which promises such a comparison, quickly degenerates into a meaningless search for verbal equivalents between Mormon doctrine and the scriptural standard, as if the author were sorting potatoes. Thus, finding it important to prove the Mormon doctrine that "the wicked go to . . . a spirit-world prison house after mortal death" (p. 251), he cites Isaiah 24:22 as support: "And they shall be gathered together, as prisoners are gathered in the pit, and shall be shut up in the prison, and after many days shall they be visited." It so happens that the reference in Isaiah is a reference to the spirit world of

Mormon doctrine, but we know that not because the cited words of Isaiah say so with any considerable degree of precision or clarity (there is no indication whatever from the context that the condition described is to occur "after mortal death"), but because the latter-day prophets of God have told us so.<sup>1</sup> Our knowledge in this particular (and, one suspects, that of the author) is not founded on reasoned analysis at all, but on revelation.

The author is guilty throughout of such citations of ambiguous biblical language in support of some point of Mormon doctrine, as though the words were susceptible of only one construction. This comes very close to the fundamentalist position: "God said it; we believe it; that's all there is to it." The naive disregard for the inherent shortcomings of language, of which Mormons in particular ought to be aware,<sup>2</sup> is unfortunate.

Occasionally the author's determination to find biblical support for the specifics of Mormon doctrine leads him to cite a passage for a proposition to which it seems, to the less passionate observer, wholly unrelated. For example, Genesis 2:15-17 is noted in support of the assertion that "divine authority, or the priesthood, was first given to Adam, who communed directly with God" (p. 155). The passage is absolutely silent as to "divine authority, or the priesthood." Again, in support of the assertion that "the Apostle James, also, spoke of revelation and its constant availability when men qualify to receive it," he cites James 1:17, which reads: "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of Lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning." Viewed with maximum charity, the method is disingenuous. Certainly, the analogy to the "scientific method" is remote.

As for the test of reason, surely one is entitled to expect that the premises on which the argument is based be themselves rationally or empirically defensible. What are we to do then with the following argument, which appears in the context of a discussion of the concept of God revealed in Joseph Smith's first vision (pp. 207-208):

Had Joseph been lying, he would never have even thought of, let alone detailedly described, the distinctive God which his story portrays. The God he saw differs so much from the universal ideas and beliefs of the day, that only truth could give the story he told!

That is, the validity of a given proposition is directly proportional to its variance from commonly received dogma. A rigorous application of this astonishing proposition to the beliefs current in the upstate New York of Joseph Smith's boyhood leads inexorably to an absolute atheism, since the one point agreed upon by the contending sects of the day was the existence of God.

In another connection the author argues that the body of scientific knowledge is expanding, that religion is like science, and, therefore, that one should expect continuing revelation of religious truth from God (p. 123). Even assuming the validity of the somewhat doubtful minor premise, the conclusion simply

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<sup>1</sup>See, e.g., Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City, Utah, 1957), IV, 596.

<sup>2</sup>Ether 12:23-25.

does not follow. To paraphrase somebody or other, if this be reason, give us the alternative—whatever it is.

The author's third test requires that application of the principles of Mormonism produce beneficial results. By what standard we determine a particular result to be beneficial we are not told. A more substantial objection, however, relates to the quality of the evidence Unopulos produces in support of his argument that Mormonism produces the asserted benefits. The first substantive chapter, Chapter Two, entitled "Revelation," contains assertions of fact, presumably resting on empirical observation, of which the following are representative:

There is no doubt that obedience to this divine law of health [Doctrine and Covenants Section 89, the "Word of Wisdom"], given with such great promises to the Saints, has greatly benefited the health of the Mormons, with corresponding temporal advantages (p. 128).

High educational activity and scholastic attainment are prevalent among the Mormons—setting a better record than is enjoyed among any other similar group or culture in the world, as many studies show (p. 129).

But one looks in vain for a single reference to indicate the source of the data on which these assertions rest.

By the time one arrives at Chapter Six, "The Simple Gospel Plan of Salvation," the pretense of reliance on objective data is abandoned entirely. We are left with no more than the author's self-serving assertion that, "Their gospel plan is most beneficial to the Mormon people, enabling them through prayerful daily living to effectively cope with the complex problems of life today" (p. 323). His apology that "space does not permit examining herein the many specific beneficial results that could be studied" is less than satisfying.

The particular errors noted are illustrative of the author's general failure to meet his burden of proof. In short, he is not true to his method. Mormonism is consistent with the fundamental principles taught by the ancient prophets and apostles, but the author has not shown it. Nor has he made out his case that Mormonism is reasonable or productive of beneficial results, though he and I believe it. The difficulty is his failure to distinguish between that which authority has revealed and that which reason and experience teach. The Bible, an affirmation of faith, is treated as a compendium of fact; and assertions of deeply held personal belief are made to serve as "evidence."

But suppose he had succeeded. Do the questions asked by Unopulos lead to the ultimate answers he seeks? Certainly it is instructive to know that Mormonism is consistent with the Bible, that it is reasonable, that it makes men happy. But does that establish its claim to be the ultimate truth about God and Man?

It is the salvation of souls, finally, that matters.<sup>3</sup> It is therefore not mere proof in the abstract, but a conviction sealed in the individual heart that is required. The relation between faith and reason, between the spiritual and the intellectual means to knowledge, is complex and difficult to articulate, but this

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<sup>3</sup>Moses 1:39; Doctrine and Covenants 18:10-16.

much is clear: the knowledge that is eternal life<sup>4</sup> proceeds in the first instance from a manner of life reflecting the will of God.<sup>5</sup> That is a process to which reason and analysis may be complementary, but for which they are an inadequate substitute. To the man who says, "Prove it, and I will live by it," God replies, "Live by it, and it will prove itself." That is not a very satisfactory answer to the sceptic; but, one supposes, neither are confused arguments based on indefensible premises. Brigham Young's "Instructions to Missionaries" commend themselves:

But let one go forth who is careful to logically prove all he says by numerous quotations from the revelations, and let another travel with him who can say, by the power of the Holy Ghost, Thus saith the Lord, and tell what the people should believe—what they should do—how they should live, and teach them to yield to the principles of salvation—though he may not be capable of producing a single logical argument—though he may tremble under a sense of his weakness, cleaving to the Lord for strength, as such men generally do, you will invariably find that the man who testifies by the power of the Holy Ghost will convince and gather many more of the honest and upright than will the merely logical reasoner.<sup>6</sup>

To the extent that reasoned argument leads men to perform Alma's experiment<sup>7</sup> it is productive of the knowledge that saves. James Unopulos appears to understand that. Unfortunately, most of the argument of this book proceeds as though reason and revelation had nothing to do with one another. The truth is that there is an intimate and reciprocal relation between the two.

The conviction of the soul ("testimony"), as distinguished from the persuasion of the mind, comes only by personal revelation, the Spirit of God speaking to the spirit of man.<sup>8</sup> But the Spirit does not speak in a vacuum. Ordinarily the communications of the Holy Ghost do not impart new substantive information but rather serve to confirm and seal upon the soul those truths which are already present in the mind.<sup>9</sup> It is in the preliminary matter of gathering and ordering intelligence of the things of God that the rational faculty is exercised. Only when that work is well and truly done can the Spirit give information. One looks to such a book as this for assistance in preparing that intellectual foundation upon which the Spirit erects the house of faith. To that end the reader is entitled to require of the author a workman-like product, true to the analytical method he purports to employ. On that condition only can reason and revelation, faith and knowledge, grow and flourish together.

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<sup>4</sup>John 17:3.

<sup>5</sup>John 7:15-17.

<sup>6</sup>*Journal of Discourses*, VIII (1861), 53.

<sup>7</sup>Alma 32:27.

<sup>8</sup>I Corinthians 2:9-14.

<sup>9</sup>Doctrine and Covenants 9:7-9.