

Review: DM810

A SUMMARY CRITIQUE

POPULAR MORMON APOLOGETICS – STAKING CLAIMS ON CHRISTIAN GROUND

a review of

Biblical Mormonism: Responding to Evangelical Criticism of LDS Theology

by Richard R. Hopkins

(Horizon Books, 1994)

and

Restoring the Ancient Church: Joseph Smith and Early Christianity

by Barry R. Bickmore

(Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research, 1999)

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Apologetics is not just an evangelical Christian venture. The past several years have seen a rise in the production and sophistication of Mormon apologetics, which has included books written on a popular level that are in some ways the Mormon equivalent of Josh McDowell's *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*. These works are based on the Mormon premise that the mainstream Christian church is the descendant of an apostate faith corrupted by, among other things, Greek philosophy, but that the Bible and church history nevertheless offer hints of the "true" apostolic faith, which was ostensibly similar in important ways to modern Mormonism. Just as Mormons claim the title of *Christian* and emphasize the name of *Jesus Christ* in the Mormon church's official title (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints), so it follows that Mormon apologists should attempt to co-opt the Bible and church history for their own.

Richard R. Hopkins's *Biblical Mormonism: Responding to Evangelical Criticism of LDS Theology* (Horizon Books, 1994) and Barry R. Bickmore's *Restoring the Ancient Church: Joseph Smith and Early Christianity* (Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research, 1999) are written by Mormon nonscholars whose goal is to defend the Mormon faith from criticism, especially by evangelical commentators. They are only two out of a host of popular Mormon apologetic works, but they emerge as the most thorough and representative of their genre, and offer a clear view of trends being manifested in Mormon apologetics today.

Claiming the Bible. Hopkins's *Biblical Mormonism* is the only comprehensive attempt to reconcile Mormon beliefs with the Bible, with little or no reference to Mormon scriptures.¹ Hopkins is an attorney and knows how to weigh evidence and construct an argument carefully. He may rightly be regarded as the leading figure in popular Mormon apologetics.

It is Hopkins's contention that "Mormonism encompasses the best understanding of biblical truth"(15), and to demonstrate this, *Biblical Mormonism* presents interpretations of biblical passages from a Mormon perspective on major doctrines, including the nature of God, the Trinity, the way to salvation, and

eschatology. Hopkins does not necessarily represent the official Mormon point of view on each subject, but his treatise is useful as an example of how Mormon apologists use the Bible.

Hopkins made a commendable effort to familiarize himself with the teachings of influential Christian apologists. For the most part, he interacts with their views responsibly and courteously; nevertheless, Hopkins occasionally fails to recognize or understand the historic or main Christian position on a given doctrine. As a rule, the more complex a doctrine is, the less Hopkins appears to have grasped it correctly.

A prime example is Hopkins's understanding of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. He regards the Trinity as "an incomprehensible conglomeration," and the doctrine of the Trinity as one of the "most telling legacies" of apostasy (70); but it is obvious from his statements in *Biblical Mormonism* and elsewhere that he has confused Trinitarianism with modalism. In *Biblical Mormonism*, Hopkins understands Trinitarianism to mean that "the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are three separate *persons*," but he adds that Trinitarians "emphatically deny that they are separate *individuals*" (72); however, Hopkins never defines what he means by either *person* or *individual*, and he generally uses these words synonymously. Elsewhere, Hopkins describes Trinitarianism as the belief that "the three persons referred to as one God are one individual, a singular center of consciousness."² A better understanding recognizes the Trinity as comprised of three *persons* or *egos*, with three *separate* centers of consciousness, but only one *essence*. As has been often said, the Trinity is comprised of three *whos*, but only one *what*.

Hopkins, however, does not seem to have grasped this distinction and, indeed, seems to have misunderstood it. He has taken the reference to God in terms of a "what" to mean that those who use this definition are "referring to God as an unknown....Because [those using the analogy] cannot understand [God], they simply label Him a 'What'" (80). This is not the intent of the Christian description; rather, the point is to clarify that God is three in a personal sense — having three distinct centers of conscious thought — but one in a nonpersonal sense, as an objective reality.

Hopkins also does not understand the mainstream Christian position on the role of works in the life of the believer. Mormons often misunderstand Christianity as teaching a type of "cheap grace" or "easy believism" in which works are irrelevant or unnecessary. Hopkins does not fall into this error, but in his attempt to understand the two views in the "Lordship Salvation" debate, he incorrectly implies that the "no lordship" view, which is often seen as encouraging "easy believism," carries as much weight among evangelicals as the correct view that works are an *inevitable result* of salvation (130). The most obvious reason for Hopkins's inadequate treatment of this complex issue is that he consults less than half a dozen sources, all of them popular works. This is one of several cases in which Hopkins incorrectly suggests, because of a lack of familiarity with a broader range of scholarly Christian and evangelical literature, that a divergent view expressed by a relatively small number of evangelical teachers can be presented on equal terms with the mainstream view.

Most often, however, Hopkins errs in attempting to fit the square peg of a Mormon doctrine into the round hole of a Scriptural citation, frequently by choosing a much smaller peg than the "hole" and filling in the gaps with putty. For example, seeking support for the Mormon doctrine of the eternal preexistence of the soul, Hopkins cites Jeremiah 1:5, in which God tells Jeremiah, "Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations." Hopkins believes that God is saying that His acquaintance with Jeremiah "had extended long before Jeremiah's birth" (101); but Hopkins assumes without justification that this verse refers to Jeremiah in terms of *actual* preexistence, rather than in terms of *ideal* preexistence (in which Jeremiah existed only with reference to God's foreknowledge). Since the idea of actual preexistence of souls is unknown in Judaism, except as the result of the later influence of Greek philosophy (!) after the time of Christ, it seems more likely that ideal preexistence is what is in view in Jeremiah 1:5.

Biblical Mormonism is an excellent resource for understanding how the Latter-day Saints interpret and understand the Bible. As a defense for a "biblical" Mormonism, however, it is a failure.

Claiming the Church. Whereas Hopkins tries to absorb the Bible into the Mormon fold, Barry Bickmore's *Restoring the Ancient Church* is concerned primarily with the testimony of Christian writers of the second century and thereafter. This author's thesis is that the writings of the church fathers bear witness to a faith similar to Mormonism, thereby giving evidence that apostolic Christianity was more like Mormonism than Christianity as it is now conceived.³

Like Hopkins, Bickmore is not a professional scholar. His professional interest is in geochemistry, and his work is published by the Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research, an organization of laypersons that produces apologetic defenses of Mormonism, primarily through newsletters, an Internet presence, and sponsorship of conferences. Bickmore's work, nevertheless, is highly respected by rank-and-file Mormons interested in apologetics, and the back cover of the book features endorsements from several key writers in Mormon apologetics, including Richard Hopkins.

Bickmore's work exemplifies many of the failings of even the most sophisticated Mormon apologists. The first portion of his book is intended to verify, from the Bible, that an apostasy was foretold, and by extension, that there was indeed an apostasy for which Mormonism's "restored gospel" was the eventual cure. All of Bickmore's citations, however, are either general warnings of apostasy with no specific description (e.g., Acts 20:29–30) or else have a known referent that does not correspond with the sort of apostasy that Mormons insist must have taken place (e.g., Gal. 1:6–8).

Many causes have been suggested for the alleged apostasy. One of the most frequently cited is the influx of Greek philosophy into the early church. To prove that Hellenistic philosophy was a poison that corrupted the pure gospel message, LDS apologists such as Bickmore regularly appeal to a late 19th-century work, Edwin Hatch's *The Influence of Greek Ideas and Usages upon the Christian Church*. Dated in some respects, Hatch's work nonetheless ably demonstrates the influence of Hellenism on the Christian Church; yet Hatch made no effort to show that these Hellenistic imports in any real sense distorted the New Testament message. In turn, Mormons have never succeeded in demonstrating that the New Testament message was corrupted or misrepresented to the point of apostasy.

Hellenistic thinking did contribute to *some* confusion in the early church, but at times in exactly the *opposite* way that Mormonism supposes. For example, it is argued that Greek philosophy rejected belief in Jesus as a deity who is independent yet subordinate to God the Father and instead encouraged the church to force Christ into the "incomprehensible conglomeration" that was the Trinity. As Richard Bauckham observes, however:

It was actually not Jewish but Greek philosophical categories which made it difficult to attribute true and full divinity to Jesus. A Jewish understanding of divine identity was open to the inclusion of Jesus in the divine identity. But Greek philosophical — Platonic — definitions of divine substance or nature and Platonic understanding of the relationship of God to the world made it extremely difficult to see Jesus as more than a semi-divine being.... In the context of the Arian controversies, Nicene theology was essentially an attempt to resist the implications of Greek philosophical understandings of divinity and to re-appropriate in a new conceptual context the New Testament's inclusion of Jesus in the unique divine identity.⁴

A historical and ideological continuity can be shown between Jewish traditions involving God's "Wisdom" or *Logos*, the New Testament definition of the nature of Christ, and the reckonings of the postapostolic church, to the Nicene Creed and beyond. Mormon apologists such as Bickmore must argue that the later church effected a "transformation" of the New Testament concepts — that strangely happened to correspond with pre-New Testament Jewish concepts, which the New Testament writers clearly drew upon in describing the nature of Christ!

In terms of reckoning members of the patristic church to be adherents of Mormon-like doctrines, Bickmore arguably achieves success, if only because some Mormon doctrines reduced to their core are little more than natural variations that we might expect any person to come up with after due

consideration. Bickmore shows, for instance, that several early Christians believed, as Mormons do, that God possessed a physical, human body. Why should this surprise us? That some ancient Christians incorrectly supposed that Genesis 1:26, which tells us that men are made in God's image and likeness, meant that God has a physical, human body as we do (the words "image" and "likeness" actually denote our authority as God's stewards and representatives on earth), means no more than that Joseph Smith repeated their mistake. Similarly, that an early Christian happened to believe in the eternal preexistence of the soul, as Mormons do, does not signify anything, for it is a natural variation upon the general question of when souls actually come into being. One might say that souls are eternal, or created upon conception, or anywhere in between, but eternity and conception are the most natural delineations to suggest. Unless it can be shown that this belief was coupled with detailed beliefs similar to Mormonism's about the nature of the premortal life (for example, that Jesus Christ and Lucifer were high-ranking brothers in spirit), the parallel is so general as to be insignificant.

The same can be said of Bickmore's finding of parallels between the practice of some Christians who danced in a circular pattern around an altar, and the Mormon temple ritual that imitates it (306). As he admits, circular dancing patterns are a feature of "many religions" (304). There is no mystical significance in this, nor any historic connection proving that ancient Christianity was more like Mormonism than modern Christianity. A circular pattern is simply the most efficient and comfortable arrangement for such a practice, and we would expect it to be repeated in diverse settings and cultures with no relationship to one another.

Bickmore's most conspicuous failure in *Restoring the Ancient Church* is a lack of depth, both in terms of source work and in terms of critical thinking. Despite the endorsements from leading LDS scholars and apologists, this work fails to deliver.

The Road Ahead. Mormon apologetics has undoubtedly grown in sophistication over the past several years, and the need is great for Christians to educate themselves in order to be more effective witnesses to their Mormon friends. Be that as it may, growth in sophistication does not equate with growth in effectiveness. Mormon apologists have expanded their horizons, but have failed to notice that the sun is still setting on their efforts.

Christians who witness to Mormons may soon find that missionaries are coming to their door armed with arguments derived from works such as those of Hopkins and Bickmore. We should be prepared for these eventual encounters, lest we be surprised to find our own apologetic weaponry turned against us.

— reviewed by James Patrick Holding

NOTES

1. Another attempt in progress, but of a far less sophisticated nature, is Edward K. Watson's multivolume *Mormonism: Faith of the Twenty-First Century* (Liahona Publications, 1998). Watson's uncritical use of sources and disdain for scholarship make it difficult to take his work seriously.
2. Richard R. Hopkins, *How Greek Philosophy Corrupted the Christian Concept of God* (Bountiful, UT: Horizon, 1998), 243.
3. The tactic of seeking parallels for Mormon belief in the works of patristic writings is becoming common among Mormon apologists. See also Michael T. Griffith, *One Lord, One Faith: Writings of the Early Christian Fathers as Evidences of the Restoration* (Bountiful, UT: Horizon, 1996).
4. Richard Bauckham, *God Crucified: Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 78.