

## Dangerous Apologetics

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### I'm an Apologist

My most read posts in the past include a review of *An Insider's View of Mormon Origins*, a personal response to the Letter to a CES Director, and a series of posts exploring the science of stylometry as it applies to the Book of Mormon. In each of these I took a decidedly apologetic stance.

Because of these posts I have found a few people who really share my Mormonism. That is a true joy. Progressive believers are a numerically rare breed. Progressive, literal believers are even fewer, and I don't live near any of them—at least not any who are out. I live in a loving community that welcomes my differences, but we all know that isn't quite the same thing as feeling safe at home. But there have been others who have embraced my apologies to support much more conservative Mormonism. I want to

warn you—you are inoculating with the live virus.

## What I Defend

I love Mormonism. I hope that people will say of me, like Brigham Young said of my ancestor, Orson Pratt, that if I were cut up into 1 inch pieces, every one of them would cry out, "Mormonism is True! Mormonism is True! Mormonism is True!" It is far from guaranteed that this will be the case in my old age, but there are truths of Mormonism that I probably can't help believing, and I use (or misuse) science, philosophy, and logic to justify these beliefs. Here are a few:

- God. I believe in God. I believe in a God who is a glorified man. I think this is a scientifically plausible, and perhaps likely, God. I believe that other conceptions of God (including His absence) are some subset of arbitrary, unscientific, improbable, pessimistic, or hopeless.
- Eternal Progression. God is not a static, all-powerful, unknowable being, but one who progressed to where he is, and one who continues to grow in glory eternally.
- Eternal Gender. My arguments support the ideas of Heavenly Parents, of God having a father and mother, and of our potential to become Gods. They give reason to expect increased specialization of roles as we move into Godhood, consistent with specialization of roles between men and women. It's science and philosophy creating a decidedly Mormon picture of God.
- The Creation. I reconcile a semi-literal view of scriptural creation with some important science about creation and evolution. In fact, evolution is a fundamental component of my religious conception of the cosmos.
- Agency. Agency is a fundamental property of existence in the universe/multiverse that I argue for.
- The Fall. My picture of Godhood practically necessitates a stage of existence separated from God without sure knowledge of His existence. Is there no other way? Nope. Well, not that I've been able to imagine.
- Atonement. I believe the atonement of Christ is essential for our salvation. There is no way around it, and there is no other way. The alternatives lead to destruction or nihilism. We can't become Gods without Christ.
- Covenant. Covenants are essential to salvation. We must show ourselves willing to enter relationships with one another and with God, and to work to build a Zion that we don't know for certain will ever be realized, acting in hope, faith, and trust that others will do the same and that Zion may yet be built.
- Revelation. If the God my arguments arrive at is real, then revelation is extremely likely. The chance that God couldn't or wouldn't communicate with His children is small and nearly absurd.

- Charity. Charity truly never faileth in the cosmos I've generated through science and argumentation. It is *the* primary virtue in this life we lead. Without love, no other virtues benefit us in the end. Love is *the* purpose of this life.
- The Historical Book of Mormon. The stylometric characteristics of the text of the Book of Mormon appear more like a translation from a multiply authored source than like any other proposed alternative.

With this list I may not have provided a defense of all of Mormonism, but it's a pretty substantial list of Mormon truth claims. I stand by it. While I have questions that remain, and I continue to examine particular details that I have reason to suspect are incomplete or incorrect, nothing in my ongoing readings or in the numerous responses I have had to my writings makes me expect major revisions. That's a pretty comforting intellectual position, and I like sharing it. I'm glad when others find strength in it.

## Dangerous Apologetics

It's true. I defend basic beliefs of Mormonism that many, many Mormons consider important, and I provide reasoning that is supported (you can decide if the support is sound or not) by philosophy, science, and logic. I give *reasons* for the hope that is in us, and that makes us feel good about the things we already believe—me included. Occasionally it gives unbelievers pause (or so a few have told me) to say, "I could see how someone believes like you do. I might even want to live in a cosmos like you describe . . . if I could believe." Yet since we are all inclined to see what we want (and are prepared) to see, I want to explicitly point out some of the dangers to typical LDS beliefs that you are risking when you adopt my apologetic defenses of faith. The connections may not be clear, but fortunately or unfortunately, most of my beliefs come as an interconnected package. If you try to split one part out, there is a good chance the *reasons* for other parts will begin to unravel. I'd love to help you see these connections, but for now you get a list. Read the links and ask me specific questions, or just enjoy whatever thoughts and questions come to you as you review this web of thought:

- God. God is a glorified human, or transhuman, or posthuman. This God is limited in ways that affect our daily religious life. He is within the grasp of humanity, with time and cooperative work. He can be mimicked, with or without belief. This God is just *one among many*. He got where he is by being one of the *fastest reproducers* in the cosmos. God's positive attributes are the result of evolution and the environmental forces.
- Eternal Progression. God evolved to where He is. He shares ancestry with Lucifer, and even with cosmic amoebas. He can cease to be relevant. He can cease to be good. He can't stop learning and growing. There is no *arriving* at godhood. There is only a never ending journey to explore the even bigger infinity of what may be. God doesn't

know anywhere close to everything, and never will. Eternal rest just means God's rest, not a stopping place.

- Eternal Gender. Heavenly Mother? Very real. Worth just as much as Heavenly Father. And it gets worse. There will be eternally lesbian and gay people. And bisexual people. For one thing, these aren't scientifically speaking "gender". For further discussion you will have to go elsewhere. Here's a great talk on Mormonism and Gender from Rosalynde Welch at the 2016 Mormon Transhumanist Association conference that is a pretty faithful starting place for thinking about this gender mess we find in Mormon theology. It's logically very difficult to embrace my apologetic reasoning and deny women the priesthood or do anything but welcome LGBTQ individuals who are seeking Christ—whether they are celibate or not. In fact, I find reasons to condemn their exclusion and to believe we are falling short of Zion as long as we continue these practices.
- The Creation. We most likely live in a universe created through evolutionary processes at the deepest levels. We reveal God as we learn science whether we believe in God or not. We learn to be like God as we increase our knowledge and our technological power. We are bound by the limits of our creation, and God is also bounded by his creation. If you want to think you can be morally good while ignoring the findings of science, or want an omnipotent and omniscient God (even simply effectively omni-), then my apologetics are not a good defense.
- Agency. While agency is fundamental to nature, most of the choices we like to call agency really aren't choices at all. Agency cannot be defined as what we do now, but must be viewed as a state of being in which we have only the slightest influence over the course of the now. Mostly we are preprogrammed by previous choices, most of which were never part of our conscious control. Agency is real, but what you think it is is most likely an illusion.
- The Fall. While the Fall is most likely real, and this life is most likely a test. Consequently, we can only prove God's existence by becoming Gods ourselves, and it isn't necessary to hold any particular set of theological beliefs to be saved. We do have to show that we love. People will be saved without ever becoming Mormon, and lots of Mormons will not be saved. This is no new concept to Mormons, but my apologetics require believing it in ways that go beyond what most people are thinking when they share it in Sunday School.
- Atonement. I find no justification for magical atonement. No cosmic scales of justice to balance. No magical undoing of past wrongs. Simply the willingness of every being who would be a God to enter into the unavoidable pain of eternal relationships. Christ is essential, *and so is everyone else.*

- Covenant. Covenants are essential to godhood, with atonement as the greatest covenant. We will build Zion together despite our differences—or perhaps because of them. Yet ordinances are only a vehicle for covenant. They provide community connections that covenant can't do without, but my apologies provide no grounds to privilege LDS ordinances over any others that accomplish the same covenant ends. While not denying a special LDS connection with God, I find no scientific, philosophical, or logical grounds for denying special connections with the divine to many other groups. And I find many reasons to equate LDS institutional structures and authority with other, entirely secular, institutions, or with the institutions of presumed false religions. LDS institutions behave too much like any other large organization to justify such privilege.
- Revelation. I personally believe God communicates at times with people, but my apologetic framework requires numerous cautions or caveats. Revelation can never be conclusively proven. Most of what people claim as revelation is easily explained as non-religious, psychological phenomena. What remains can always be explained without reference to God (I'm not commenting on how well). When revelation happens, it is limited in both its reception and interpretation by our limits, biases, and prejudices—no matter who gets it. Most revelation is mundane and quotidian, even for our inspired leaders. It is a rare mind that can even conceive of the questions that allow for truly new revelations. Our institutional structures resist revolutionary revelation. This perspective paints a picture of a church that is 99.9% human and maybe 0.1% divine. Other churches or groups may do a better job on the human part, even *if* they have less of the divine. Is it worth staying Mormon with those percentages? From my perspective, the answer is yes, but following my logic you may understand why others conclude differently. From my perspective, it's a picture where the divine exists in *all* of humanity, not just 0.1%, but Mormonism is still worth it.
- Charity. Obedience is *not* the first principle of heaven—not even obedience to God. It is only virtuous in subordination to love. Obedience that does not foster love will damn us. Of course, this love is not simply an emotion. It includes deep empathy, but also includes the willingness to do what is needed to help others be exalted. So showing love is complex, but it is never subordinate to obedience.
- The Historical Book of Mormon. Nephi and Moroni were real people. *Real* people. So was Joseph. They messed up God's word in the Book of Mormon just like they said they did. So we are morally obligated to wrestle with the scriptures and not simply accept their flawed and incomplete understanding of reality as the final word. We have to take seriously the scholarship that demonstrates prophetic limitations. We

may have in our hands tangible evidence of God's action in the world (for those who believe God might exist), but it is primarily a human work. Can it bring us to close to God? I hope so. I rely on it. Is it the most correct book on earth? Perhaps, but I'm not sure what that means. For my stylometric defense of a translated, historical Book of Mormon to stand, prophets have to be mostly human and a little bit prophet—even when they are writing inspired scripture. That's the historical book stylometry supports. To use my defense of Joseph's story requires letting go of many comforting divine certainties. It requires second guessing the plain words of the Book of Mormon, and using all the tools at our disposal to judge what is right and what is the weakness of men. We aren't off the hook for anything—even if it's written in plain English in the Book of Mormon.

I have defended LDS beliefs, but as you can see these defenses come at a cost. There is no rest, and little certainty, in this worldview that scientifically defends Mormonism. There are a lot of reasons to trust both God and others, including LDS leaders, and to persevere in the face of difficulty and doubt, but there is no room to relinquish personal moral responsibility—even to the servants of God. Apologetics are a dangerous road. If they preserve your previous Mormonism intact, your arguments are probably flawed or poorly informed. If they change you, there is no guarantee you will like the changes—or that your family or friends will. Yet the glory of God is intelligence, and while we are here to love, knowledge is required to choose the most loving actions.

I know there are defenses (and criticisms) of Mormonism that differ from mine. I even find some of them logical. I hope I have given you a glimpse of the interconnectedness of my apologetics. It's easy to make mistakes in this endeavor, but mine is not the kind of approach that lets you pick and choose freely which arguments you adopt and which you discard. Our choices are constrained by deciding to give reasons for the faith that is in us, and claiming science, philosophy, and logic as the foundations of our reasons. You can't show a multi-authored Book of Mormon without recognizing the tribalism, racism, and sexism of its prophets and the limitations of God. You can't have a material, evolved God and claim sound reason in denying the priesthood to women or marriage to Lesbians and Gays. There may be other ways to have your cake and eat it, too, but I don't have one for you. So take care in following me too closely. The results of inoculation with my vaccine may not be what you were after. But I think it helped me, and I do love good company.

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## Jonathan Cannon

Jonathan lives in rural Georgia with his wife and three boys, teaching Chemistry and enjoying the good people of his community. He studied Molecular Biology at Brigham Young University, and Biophysics at the University of Wisconsin, Madison.

Jonathan is passionate about fatherhood, teaching and learning, Mormonism, and dance (he's much better at the first three), and dabbles in home repairs, various crafts, poetry, music, gardening, and Transhumanism. He has enjoyed many years working in Primary, with Young Adults and Ward Missions in various capacities. He currently enjoys serving in his ward and community however he is able. He posts on whatever interests him at the moment at <http://theyogrehunt.blogspot.com/>

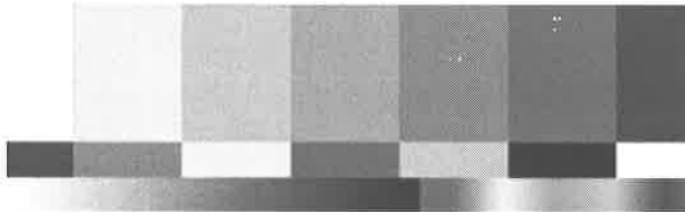
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