

FROM THE EDITOR

“A REAL FIGHT”

By Dan Wotherspoon

IN PREPARING THIS issue for press, I've been struck by the intensity of emotions which have given energy to the various letters, stories, and essays in its pages. I do not mean to say that the writers have not shown restraint, nor that I think you'll feel emotionally exhausted by the time you close the final cover. Rather, I believe it's more a matter of the subjects that occupy the writers and how close the issues they are discussing are to their hearts.

As evidenced by the letters section and the letter-turned-essay by Kevin Christensen that follows it, the “Reframing the Book of Mormon” section in the March 2004 SUNSTONE seems to have energized readers. In putting that section together—from essays we already had on hand as well as two that were written by invitation—we had hoped its variety of approaches, issues, and positions would invite vigorous exchanges. As our note introducing the essays states, many feel this is a crossroads moment for our foundational scripture and our tradition's relationship with it. We're pleased to see that revisionists *and* traditionalists, critics *and* defenders, have responded. We hope all voices, all perspectives, will continue to feel invited to the conversation table set by our various forums. Please bring your faith, whether it's strong or feeling worse for recent wear—and even if it's based on purely naturalistic presuppositions. We'll do our best to give you a chance to be heard.

Besides the feelings fueling the most recent Book of Mormon discussions, a great deal of emotion is uncovered in John-Charles Duffy's cover article, “Defending the Kingdom: Rethinking the Faith.” We believe it's the longest single piece ever published in SUNSTONE, but we don't believe the story of the rise in influence of LDS apologetics could have been effectively told in fewer pages (or with fewer endnotes!). It's a wonderful, carefully written, well-articulated analysis of this growing field and its impact on Mormonism and Latter-day Saint faith.

Duffy has taken great care to look at the various traditions and attitudes that have set the stage for the shape LDS apologetics has taken, as well as the variety of temperaments and approaches to defending the faith evi-

dent among the leading players. He writes with a keen eye, and weighs in with his own preferences and hopes for how the discourse might be improved. It's not an emotional article, but apologetics is an emotional subject and an enterprise driven by deeply felt, soul-level concerns. It's fed by conviction and energy wells that range from a passionate drive to proclaim the true gospel, to the fear of being duped, to a zest for intellectual sport. It is, in short, a subject bound to excite.

And I'm excited by that fact. As we had hoped would happen in inviting diverse views on the Book of Mormon, we hope readers of this article (and *all* the soulful articles and essays in this issue) will feel welcome to respond. Write letters and thoughtful pieces for publication. Join the discussions at our August Salt Lake symposium. We'll work hard to help you be heard.

THE Mormonism I love is our faith's most robust version. It's the version that proclaims radical agency and unfettered freedom for souls to grow. It's the tradition that says a real contest for souls was and is going on, a genuine adventure in which, every day, we decide the risk/reward level we're willing to embrace. Do we welcome more or less? Are we willing to risk more pain in order to love more? Are we feeling up to leaving our comfortable lives for challenges that lie beyond the veil? This version of Mormonism says that even God could (not would) “cease to be God” if God were to stop loving so completely, stop hoping for us and calling to us to be more than we ever thought possible.

I love the sensibilities and possibilities in the well-known-to-many William James thought experiment:

Suppose that the world's author put the case to you before creation, saying: “I am going to make a world not certain to be saved, a world the perfection of which shall be conditional merely, the condition being that each several agent does its own level best. I offer you the chance of taking part in such a world. Its safety, you see, is unwarranted. It is a real adventure, with

real danger, yet it may win through. It is a social scheme of cooperative work genuinely to be done. Will you join the procession? Will you trust yourself and trust the other agents enough to face the risk?”¹

Though sometimes I get tired and feel like sitting out an inning or two, this is the kind of proposal I choose to say “yes” to.

And that, baseline, is why I like apologists *and* revisionists, those who are sure the Book of Mormon is a literal translation of an ancient record *and* those who are equally convinced it's better understood as the product of Joseph's myth-making imagination. It's why I like both professional academics *and* amateurs with raw and refreshing perspectives. The Mormonism I love is Zion Mormonism, which knows there's a “social scheme of cooperative work genuinely to be done” and isn't ready to say it has no need of this energy, or that twist, or this temperament, or even that fear. If it's our level best, both we and the world will win through.


As much as I like the William James idea above, I find myself thinking even more often of another of James's sensibilities:

For my own part, I do not know what the sweat and blood of this life mean, if they mean anything short of this. If this life be not a real fight, in which something is eternally gained for the universe by success, it is no better than a game of private theatricals from which we may withdraw at will. But it feels like a real fight—as if there were something really wild in the universe which we, with all our idealities and faithfulness, are needed to redeem.”²

I try very hard to keep my eye on developments in the worlds of both religion and science. I find myself naturally predisposed to prefer the empirical to the merely ideal. I'm fascinated with the workings of the universe and sense that the sciences have much to teach us. But when push comes to shove, I find I can't go down the reductionist road that some feel is endemic to the scientific enterprise. The science that attracts me is the science that suggests the universe's limitless potentialities.

Perhaps I'm wrong; perhaps I am ultimately just chemicals and energies dancing their dance, with my life and hopes no more than a throwaway part in their drama. But oh my, do I feel like I'm in a “real fight”—that something real is at stake in the questions I have and the issues that occupy my mind and wrench my heart. Maybe I ultimately

have no soul, and there is nothing real, individual or collective, to redeem; but I'm spilling sweat and blood that *feels* real, that feels redemptive of . . . *something!*

I'VE been struck by the emotions evident in this issue of SUNSTONE. It's been a pleasure to be engage in a cooperative work with these writers and their perspectives. We're all in a "real fight." May we all win out. 

NOTES

1. William James, *Pragmatism* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1991), 127.
2. William James, "Is Life Worth Living?" *The Search for Meaning in Life: Readings in Philosophy*, ed. Robert F Davidson (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1962): 61.

PLEASE FORGIVE . . .

In the March 2004 issue, we accidentally attributed Anita Tanner's poem, "Recipe from a Family File," to the wrong poet. Our sincerest apologies to Anita. Please enjoy the poem once more!



RECIPE FROM A FAMILY FILE

The smell burns my nostrils.
Lye soap, made from rendered fat and kerosene, stirred with a stick in a giant tub
over the old woodstove out back.

Then it is cooled for hours,
tipped from the tub onto a board spread with a sheet, scored into bars to last all year.

Meaner than dirt,
healing any grease or cow dung,
saviour of clothes in a wringer washer.
Stronger than bleach or sun.

After the bar smooths in the wash,
I reach in,
grasp the slick oval moon,
scour my hands
until they resemble sliced bread,
the backs sunslapped,
curved palms opening white
from the lye knife.

—ANITA TANNER

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