

A FUTURE FOR MORMON THEOLOGY

By Daniel H. Rector

TWENTY YEARS AGO Sterling McMurrin and Hyrum Andrus made the last serious attempts at writing Mormon theology. The fact that two such disparate descriptions could be written of the same religion foreshadowed the discovery of *doctrinal development* in Mormonism—a discovery which has made systematic theological writing impossible. For while it is always proper to speak of “one Mormon’s theology,” we can no longer refer to “one Mormon theology.” Doctrinal diversity has overwhelmed any effort to find unity.

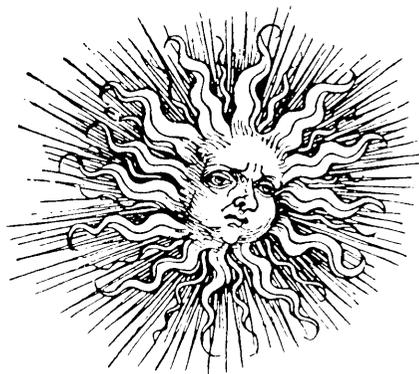
A century ago, a similar dilemma shook the larger Christian scholarly community with the discrediting of “biblical theology.” Biblical theology attempts to treat the religion of Israel as a structurally unified whole. From the end of the eighteenth century through most of the nineteenth, it was a respected academic discipline. But in the 1890s J. Wellhausen published his thesis that the religion of Israel evolved from a kind of primitive polytheism to a highly developed ethical monotheism. By combining a critical scrutiny of the sources with the ruthless simplicity of the evolutionary paradigm, Wellhausen produced a theory that seemed unsailable. Suddenly, it was no longer possible to speak of *the* theology of the Old Testament; indeed, no one even tried. For a generation after Wellhausen, no book on the topic of biblical theology appeared in either German or English, and the subject was dropped from the curriculum of many theological schools. Stripped of its theological unity, the Bible became a topic befitting historical study only.

However, cracks eventually developed in Wellhausen’s critical orthodoxy. By the 1950s

historians and archaeologists were discovering that many of the most fundamental features of Israel’s religion were not late developments at all, but had been present in some form from the earliest periods. Without minimizing the vast biblical diversity, theologians were able to find unifying themes such as “election,” “covenant” and “promise” woven throughout Old Testament history. The same ideas informed the New Testament. Today, a century after Wellhausen, it has once again become respectable to speak of a core theology in the biblical canon.

Will Mormon theology follow a parallel course? Will scholars sift through the diversity and discover deeper unifying themes, present from the beginning? Only time—and a lot of good scholarship—will tell. But two things seem certain. First, historical and scriptural studies must inform theological ones. Second, any authentic Mormon theology must partake not only of the rational but also of the revelatory.

Before a theology of Mormonism can once again be attempted, historians must discover as far as possible what actually happened in Mormon origins and why. This effort has been proceeding in earnest for a generation, and may already provide an adequate basis for doing some theology. However, recent controversies over issues as fundamental as identifying the earliest priesthood restoration traditions illustrate how far the new Mormon history has yet to go. Of course, there are limits to what historians can tell us. The supernatural dimension of the story is beyond the scope of the historical method, and the presuppositions of that method limit the range of possible conclusions.



Still, we cannot do good theology from bad history.

Concurrent with this effort, historians must discover all of the variety within Mormon doctrine throughout our history, taking care not to impose an artificial harmony on their findings—Wellhausen’s experience should serve to warn us against simplistic theories of doctrinal evolution.

As we understand how our story developed and why, theologians can begin to pull together the unifying threads of Mormon theology in a responsible way. At this point the theological task will still be essentially descriptive. Care must be taken not to cast Mormon theology into the shape of one’s own preferences as Andrus and McMurrin did. However, once all this preliminary work is completed, once critical scholarship has identified whatever consistency and unity exists amid the seemingly endless variety, then we are ready for the essentially creative and even prophetic task of finding meaning in the story for Mormons today. Understanding from a theological perspective where we came from and why we are here we can begin to see where we are to go. However, neither the historian nor the descriptive theologian alone can take us there. For while objective scholarship may give us a new Mormon history, a new Mormon theology will also require the intuitive and prescriptive approach associated with the spirit of revelation.

To be authoritative for the entire Church, revelation must come through ecclesiastical channels. But revelation useful for theologians may also come from prophets and visionaries found throughout God’s people.

Unfettered by the scholar’s rigorous methodology, prophets are by nature unsystematic. Their message is hyperbolic and careless of internal consistency. But it is the precious raw material with which the new Mormon theologians must work. It is the uniquely Mormon promise of ongoing revelation at all levels combined with unflinching scholarship which gives us hope for a new Mormon theology that is at once more faithful to the past and more responsive to the present.

The history of biblical scholarship encourages us to celebrate the pluralism within Mormon doctrine. At the same time, it holds the promise of discovering unifying principles within that diversity. And while history necessarily predominates in current Mormon studies, let us work toward the time when we will tap the rich potential of Mormon theology through the creative synthesis of dispassionate scholarship and impassioned prophetic vision.