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The Test of Section Sixty-seven

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Abstract: This article examines the idea that Joseph Smith could not have been an impostor who wrote the Book of Mormon. His limited education and young age at the time make the idea absurd, as does the fact that the educated William E. M'Lellin tried unsuccessfully to create a revelation from the Lord (D&C 67) similar to the many revelations received by Joseph Smith.

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THE TEST OF SECTION SIXTY-SEVEN.

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Whatever Joseph Smith was or was not, he was certainly fearless in all his assertions of divine inspiration. At a time when high religious excitement proclaimed belief in an immaterial God, and in the actual unity of an immaterial trinity, the boy-prophet declared that he had beheld a vision in which the Father and the Son had appeared to him, as two separate beings, and as beings of material existence in the form of man. Greatly elated over this incomparable vision, the young boy hastened to communicate the things he had learned to a distinguished friend, a sectarian minister; but to his utter astonishment, the boy was ridiculed and called a fool, then maligned and persecuted. Yet he had seen a vision, and fearlessly he remained true to that assertion.

Again, not many years after, an angel visited him. Angels were, in Christian theology, however, supernatural beings of a bygone age. No one believed in them when Moroni came to Joseph. Yet, Joseph declared in soberness that an angel had visited him, and had restored the gospel of Christ. And for that fearless assertion, the young man was further persecuted.

Then Joseph published a book in his young manhood. He called it the Book of Mormon, and said it was a translation of certain ancient American records, revealed to him by divine power. The world stood aghast at his audacity. It tried to prove the book of spurious authorship. It tried to prove the book merely a feeble effort of a literary quack. It tried in every way to throw discredit upon the book. But Joseph Smith remained undaunted. The world could not intimidate him, and so it persecuted him.

Then, in his maturity, this remarkable man declared himself to be a prophet of God. He claimed to hold divine communion with the Creator of the world, and issued revelation upon revelation to the Church and to its individual members. Unbelievers laughed in derision; enemies protested indignantly against such blasphemy; and even followers of the daring prophet began to doubt his inspiration. But intrepid as ever, the prophet maintained that he was divinely called, and fearlessly gave to all the world an infallible test by which his revelations could be tried to the uttermost.

It was in the year 1831. A conference had been convened to consider the advisability of compiling and publishing the numerous revelations—professedly given by God to Joseph Smith—which had hitherto been preserved only in manuscript form. The conference deemed it proper, and even necessary, to publish these revelations; but a discussion arose concerning the language in which they were expressed. Joseph Smith was not a master of elegant English. His education had not trained him in artistic expression. There were some men in the Church far better educated than the prophet. They criticized his language, and thought, apparently, that the revelations ought to be revised and expressed in a more nearly correct, and certainly a more lofty, style. Then the prophet again declared that he had received divine direction from God.

‘And now I, the Lord,’ said the great I Am, “give unto you a testimony of the truth of these commandments which are lying before you. Your eyes have been upon my servant, Joseph Smith, Jr., and his language you have known, and his imperfections you have known; and you have sought in your hearts knowledge that you might express beyond his language; this you also know. Now seek ye out of the book of commandments, even the least that is among them, and appoint him that is the most wise among you; if there be any among you that shall make

one like unto it, then ye are justified in saying that ye do not know that they are true; but if ye cannot make one like unto it, ye are under condemnation, if ye do not bear record that they are true."

It was a daring revelation to give to a body of enlightened followers. It was even a hazardous thing to throw such a gauntlet before men like Oliver Cowdery, Sidney Rigdon and William E. M'Lellin. Think of Joseph Smith—the poor son of an impoverished farmer, who had learned in school little more than to read common print and to write his own name—daring William E. M'Lellin—who had taught school successfully in five states of the Union, and who was noted for a ready flow of good language—to write a single section like the least of the revelations in the book of commandments! Was it unparalleled conceit and presumption that prompted such fearlessness, or was it implicit confidence in the unique quality of the revelations dictated by divine inspiration? Would not so bold a declaration tempt even men of superior wisdom to pit themselves against the reputed man of God?

Certainly, one man, at least, was brought low in the dust of humiliation because he presumed to apply the test and write a revelation in the name of the Lord:

"After the foregoing was received," writes the Prophet, "William E. M'Lellin, as the wisest man, in his own estimation, having more learning than sense, endeavored to write a commandment like unto one of the least of the Lord's, but failed; it was an awful responsibility to write in the name of the Lord. The Elders and all present that witnessed this vain attempt of a man to imitate the language of Jesus Christ, renewed their faith in the fulness of the Gospel, and in the truth of the commandments and revelations which the Lord had given to the Church through my instrumentality; and the elders signified a willingness to bear testimony of their truth to all the world."

Thus was the test applied in the lifetime of Joseph, and thus was his declaration of divine inspiration vindicated. No one since the day of William E. M'Lellin has seen fit to make an attempt like his. Yet, the test was not for M'Lellin's day only. When the book of Doctrine and Covenants was finally printed, in 1835, the revelation prescribing the divinely appointed test was included as Section Sixty-seven. And the section has retained its place from that day to this. Not a word has been changed; not one element of the meaning has been altered. As a test, it is just as

applicable at present, and just as forceful, as in the time of William E. M'Lellin. Any one who doubts may apply the test to-day, to-morrow, or at any time; though, as the author of our new manual very wisely says, "it is a most dangerous thing to do."

As a revelation containing an applicable test, section sixty-seven is, then, of especial interest and value to us. And the value is evident and important, even without making an actual application of the test. Let us suppose for a moment that Joseph Smith was never at any time divinely inspired—that he was nothing better than an unscrupulous impostor. It must be conceded then that he was a man of remarkable ability, though his education was limited. The Book of Mormon alone is a monumental work. In all its pages, from the lesser plates of Nephi, from Mormon's abridgement of the greater plates, from the record of Zeniff, from the story of Jared and his brother, and from other interpolated parts, there is not a single contradiction, not a single absurd doctrine or conclusion. On the other hand, the book shows a steady growth and development of the story; it reveals a philosophic system of theology; it displays perfect harmony between it and the Holy Bible. Again, in the many revelations contained in the book of Doctrine and Covenants, there are no contradictory statements there is no obscuration of the doctrine of the Christ, there is no confusion in the duties of officers or members. On the contrary, the book is so clear that the whole Church is built up after its directions. There is no essential point of Church doctrine that was not revealed by Joseph Smith; there is no point of Church organization or discipline that was not provided for by Joseph Smith. Certainly then, if he were an impostor, he must have been a man of clear insight, of remarkable analytical power; of wonderful executive ability.

Now, if an impostor possessed the capability of successfully producing a work so complicated as the Book of Mormon, and of foisting upon the world a system of philosophy so nearly perfect as "Mormonism," and further, of effecting a Church organization far more perfect than that of the German army,—is it credible that he would throw into the face of the world a test of his labors so simple, and yet so infallible, as that contained in section sixty-seven of the Doctrine and Covenants? Consider again the fact

that Joseph Smith was an unlettered man, that he had little skill in literary art. Remember further, that many of his followers, in his own day, were far more highly gifted in the way of the world than he. Would he then dare these men of superior literary ability to write a single revelation equal to the least of his? Remember also that we of to-day have better educational advantages than even the most favorably situated of Joseph's day. Would then an impostor, so farsighted as Joseph Smith seems to have been, have left on record a challenge for all succeeding generations to write a single revelation equal to the least of his? Would not, rather, an intelligent impostor refrain from calling undue attention to his purported revelations? Would he not certainly exercise the utmost care not to prescribe any test whereby those revelations might be detected as false? And if by any chance some foolish test had been allowed to creep into the would-be sacred word, would not the impostor or his friends eagerly seize the first opportunity to expunge that test, and even the whole revelation in which it was contained? Certainly, a man who had planned his work so well as Joseph Smith—were he an impostor—planned his, would not be guilty of so gross an oversight as to leave among his printed revelations so easy a test as that in section sixty-seven.

The conclusion of the whole matter has, of course, been long self-evident. We are grateful to Joseph Smith for fearlessly giving the unbelieving world a test that may be applied to his work at any time. But the fair-minded man will see that an application of the test is unnecessary. The very fearlessness of Joseph's assertion that no uninspired man can write a revelation equal to the least of his, is evidence of his good faith and of his divine assurance. No mere impostor would dare place so unqualified a challenge before all the world.

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