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## The God-or-Devil Dilemma Argument for the Book of Mormon

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The God-or-Devil Dilemma Argument for the Book of Mormon

Elder Tad R. Callister is a member of the Presidency of the Seventy in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In his General Conference address on October 2, 2011, Callister presented an argument in support of his theme, "The Book of Mormon—a Book from God." The argument reportedly comes from his great-great grandfather Willard Richards, an apostle in the LDS Church under both Joseph Smith and Brigham Young. According to LeGrand Richards, grandson of Willard's nephew Franklin, Willard's first impression of the Book of Mormon was that it "was either written by God or the devil"—and after reading it twice in ten days he had concluded, "The devil could not have written it—it must be from God." [1]

### The Argument

Callister compares Richards's argument to C. S. Lewis's most memorable argument, the classic *aut deus aut malus homo* (Latin, "either God or a bad man") dilemma argument for the deity of Jesus Christ. [2] According to Lewis, a merely decent or nice man, a "good teacher," who was not God would not claim the sorts of exclusive, divine prerogatives that Jesus did, forcing us to choose between viewing him as a very bad man—"a madman or something worse"—or the divine Son of God.

According to Callister, "Likewise, we must make a simple choice with the Book of Mormon: it is either of God or the devil." This choice is forced on us by the fact that "it is either the word of God as professed, or it is a total fraud." The Book of Mormon "claims to be the word of God— every sentence, every verse, every page," and if it is not, "it is a sophisticated but, nonetheless, diabolical hoax."

To determine which of these viewpoints is correct, he tells his listeners, "Ask yourself if the following scriptures from the Book of Mormon draw you closer to God or to the devil." He then quotes Book of Mormon texts urging people to "feast upon the words of Christ," to "build your foundation" on Christ, to "come unto Christ, and be perfected in him" (2 Nephi 32:3; Helaman 5:12; Moroni 10:32). Callister asks, "Could these statements from the Book of Mormon have possibly been authored by the evil one?" He argues that they could not, because Christ's teaching that Satan would never be divided against himself (Matt. 12:24-26) proves that Satan would never encourage people to turn to his arch-enemy, Jesus Christ. Since scriptures that teach people to worship, love, and serve Christ cannot come from the devil, the Book of Mormon "must be from God." [3]

This argument presented by Callister takes the following logical, deductive form:

- Either the Book of Mormon is from God, or it is from the devil.
- It is not from the devil.
- Therefore, it is from God.

The argument is a deductively valid one, which simply means that the form of the argument is properly structured or ordered such that if the first two statements (the *premises*) are both true then the third statement (the *conclusion*) must also be true. When assessing a deductively valid argument, the only relevant way to challenge the truth of the conclusion is to critique one or both of the premises. I will consider each of the premises in turn.

### God or the Devil: The Argument's First Premise

Is it true that the Book of Mormon is either from God or the devil? Dilemmas like this can be and often are oversimplifications, but some logical dilemmas are, after all, quite reasonable. One of the most common fallacies is the false dilemma, and it is important that we be able to recognize true logical dilemmas from false dilemmas. Here are some good examples of true logical dilemmas:

- Either Jesus Christ rose from the grave, or he did not.
- Either Joseph Smith saw Jesus Christ in 1820, or he did not see Jesus Christ in 1820.
- Joseph Smith was either a true prophet of God or a false prophet.

Here are some examples of false dilemmas; note how these differ from the ones just stated:

- Either Jesus Christ rose from the grave, or the disciples stole the body.
- Either Joseph Smith saw Jesus Christ in 1820, or he experienced a demonic deception.
- Joseph Smith was either a true prophet of God or the Antichrist.

The first three statements are true logical dilemmas because in each case the two choices express the only hypothetical possibilities, either by definition or by accepted facts. The first two are proper dilemmas by simple definition: one either rose from the grave or one did not; Joseph either saw Jesus in 1820 or he did not. The third statement is a proper dilemma by accepted facts: it is an undisputed fact that Joseph explicitly claimed to be a prophet of God, and in such cases one either is a true prophet of God or one is a false prophet.

The next three statements are all false dilemmas because in each case significant hypothetical alternatives are overlooked or ignored. For example, if Jesus did not rise from the grave, any number of other things might have happened. The disciples may have stolen the body, or the Romans may have moved it, or the body might have been buried in a different place, or the reports of the empty tomb may be false...all of these hypothetical scenarios and more have been put forward and defended by non-Christians. The statement is therefore a false dilemma. This doesn't mean the conclusion that Jesus rose from the grave is false (it turns out that *all* of the many proposed alternative theories are seriously flawed), but it does mean this dilemma is not a good premise to use in an argument for Jesus' resurrection. In the next statement, Joseph Smith may have seen Jesus, or he may have experienced a demonic apparition, or he may have made the whole thing up (and there are still other possibilities). Finally, if Joseph Smith was not a true prophet, he must (since he claimed to be a prophet) be a false prophet, but it does not follow that he is the Antichrist.

In order to assess the first premise of Callister's God-or-devil dilemma argument, we need to be clear as to its meaning. By themselves, the expressions "of God" and "of the devil" are somewhat ambiguous. However, in context Callister evidently means that the Book of Mormon was supernaturally inspired either by God or by the devil. One reason for concluding that this is his meaning is the fact that by "of God" he clearly means inspired by God supernaturally as the very word of God, which suggests that "of the devil" in the same context means supernaturally inspired by the devil. Furthermore, Callister introduces the dilemma with the words of his great-great-grandfather, "That book was either *written* by God or the devil" (emphasis added). Posed in that way, the dilemma would seem rather clearly to mean that the Book of Mormon must either be inspired by God or be inspired by the devil.

Assuming this is Callister's meaning, the dilemma is clearly a false one. A fraudulent scripture certainly could be concocted by a false teacher without needing to have it supernaturally inspired by the devil. Mormons do believe that the Book of Mormon is the word of God, and it is quite correct to say that this claim is either true or false. Thus, we could easily agree that either the Book of Mormon is the word of God, or it is not the word of God. But if it is not the word of God, it might not be the word of the devil, either. It might be the word of man.

Consider the following genuine logical dilemma posed by Jesus Christ: "The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?" (Matt. 21:25 ESV). Since John the Baptist obviously was a man, Jesus' dilemma is logically valid: if his baptism was not of heavenly origin (i.e., from God), then it was of human origin. These two views exhausted the hypothetical possibilities in that context. Notice that Jesus' dilemma does not exclude a role for Satan in a religious practice not mandated from God, nor does it need to say anything about the devil at all, since to say that John's baptism was of man would in no way exclude a demonic aspect if such were involved. On the other hand, if Jesus had asked if John's baptism was "from heaven or from the devil," Jesus' critics might plausibly have responded that these two views ignored a third possibility, namely, that John was simply doing his own thing.

We should probably say the same thing about Callister's first premise. Perhaps the Book of Mormon is neither of God nor of the devil; perhaps it is of man. In order to make the God-or-devil dilemma work, Callister would need to show that a book that claims to be the word of God but is not would have to be inspired by the devil. Callister points out that Joseph claimed that an angel of God gave him the Book of Mormon plates and that he translated them by the power of God. If Joseph's claims on these points were false, that would be very bad indeed, but would it require the conclusion that the book was a production of Satan? Not necessarily. Joseph may have made up the story about the angel appearing to him, or he may have been suffering from delusions. Likewise, Joseph may have mistakenly thought he was inspired to translate the plates, or he may have knowingly claimed to have a divine gift of translation that he did not. Again, Callister poses a valid dilemma when he says, "It is either the word of God as professed, or it is a total fraud,"[4] but a "total fraud" need not be a *Satanically* inspired fraud.

To salvage the argument, one might suggest reinterpreting Willard Richards's and Tad Callister's dilemma so that "of the devil" did not mean inspired supernaturally by the devil. To do this, however, one would need to interpret "of God" to mean something other than supernaturally inspired by God. For example, someone might suggest that the Book of Mormon must either be something God approves or something the devil approves. Such an approach to the first premise, however, actually makes it far less plausible as a true logical dilemma. After all, God might approve of or like some things in the Book of Mormon but not others, and the devil likewise might be happy about some parts of the Book of Mormon but not other parts. All sorts of religious writings may be regarded as good books with some significant errors, or as bad books that make some good points.

The "God or a bad man" dilemma that C. S. Lewis and other Christians have posed with regard to the identity of Jesus Christ is a genuine logical dilemma once one understands that Jesus did make the divine claims reported in the Gospels (a point not at all lost on Lewis, by the way). If I were to claim in all seriousness that I would be sitting on the throne of God on Judgment Day deciding who lived forever in God's kingdom and who did not, dispensing condemnation to some and forgiveness to others at my own discretion, you would rightly conclude that I was a menace. It would make no sense to reject such divine claims from me and at the same time to suggest that I was a pretty decent guy or even a good theologian! Lewis's argument works because his dilemma, properly understood in context, does present two mutually exclusive possibilities regarding someone (anyone!) who claims to exercise the prerogatives of the Creator of the universe. The "God or the devil" dilemma with regard to the Book of Mormon does not, however, hold up, because a book that falsely claims to be inspired by God might be inspired by the devil or merely inspired by human creativity and ambition.

#### **Not of the Devil: The Argument's Second Premise**

The second premise of the Richards-Callister argument is that the Book of Mormon cannot be "of the devil" because it draws people "closer to God" and teaches them to come to Christ and build their lives on him. The devil, Callister explains, would "be divided against himself and thus be destroying his own kingdom" if he were to encourage people to align themselves with the kingdom of Christ.[5]

It is true that Satan would never deliberately undermine his own dominion or control over people's lives, as Jesus taught in his famous comment denying that his exorcisms were merely "Satan driving out Satan" (Matt. 12:25-26; Mark 3:23-26; Luke 11:17-18). However, Satan is not above pretending to support the cause of Christ for his own diabolical purposes. Simon Peter thought he was defending Jesus' divine calling as the Messiah (Christ) by denying that Jesus would be rejected by the Jewish authorities and put to death, but Jesus responded to Peter by saying, "Get behind me, Satan!" (Matt. 16:21-23; Mark 8:31-33). Paul, in the context of criticizing those who "preach another Jesus, whom we did not preach," warns that "even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light" (2 Cor. 11:4, 14). John, likewise in the context of warning about false teachers who claim to represent Jesus Christ, described those who follow the sinful path of such false teachers as "children of the devil" (1 John 3:10). Both Jesus and his apostles warned about "false prophets" and "false teachers" who claimed to represent Christ (Matt. 7:15-23; 24:23-24; Mark 13:21-22; 2 Peter 2:1; 1 John 4:1-6). Although we should not make such judgments lightly or carelessly, the sad reality is that some people who talk in glowing terms about Christ and profess to follow him are, according to New Testament standards, really working for the kingdom of the devil.

I have already argued that there is no need to claim that the Book of Mormon is either directly inspired by God or directly inspired by the devil. However, the Book of Mormon might be "of the devil" in the more general sense of contributing to the cause of the devil's agenda. We cannot assume that if a book such as the Book of Mormon speaks in pious language about Jesus Christ, then that book cannot in some sense be "of the devil." After all, even the Book of Mormon itself describes what it calls "this great and abominable church" and claims that "the devil...was the founder of it" (1 Nephi 13:6; also 14:3, 9, 10, 17; 22:22-23). Clearly, then, the Book of Mormon itself acknowledges that some people who claim to believe in Christ and to follow Christ are deceived by the devil. If this is so, then it is not impossible for the Book of Mormon to be "of the devil" in some sense, even though it contains many pious statements about Christ.

Consider the following statements, each appearing in writings regarded by many as scripture:

- "When Jesus appeared on earth, he performed miracles and great wonders for the salvation of humanity."[6]
- "His name will be Christ Jesus, the son of Mary, held in honour in this world and the Hereafter."[7]
- "Jesus established in the Christian era the precedent for all Christianity, theology, and healing. Christians are under as direct orders now, as they were then, to be Christlike, to possess the Christ-spirit, to follow the Christ-example, and to heal the sick as well as the sinning."[8]
- "Never have I read in the works of the philosophers anything that can compare to the maxims of Jesus.... He could convert water into wine; he could change death into life, disease into health; he could calm the seas, still the storms, call up fish with a silver coin in its mouth."[9]
- "And as you go and preach, baptize the people in the name of Christ. They who believe and are baptized shall rise up in the newness of the life of Christ...."[10]

The above quotations come, in chronological order, from the *Gospel of Judas* (late 2nd cent.), the *Qur'an* (7th cent.), *Science and Health* (1875), the *Archko Volume* (1884), and the *Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ* (1908). Each of these writings makes respectful and honorable statements about Jesus and encourages people to believe in him. Three of them are in effect alternative "gospels" or books focusing directly on Jesus. Yet each book also makes highly controversial and clearly unbiblical statements about Jesus and about the gospel of Christ. Are these books "of the devil"? A Christian could easily justify such a conclusion, without necessarily suggesting that any of them was inspired supernaturally by the devil and without denying that there are good and true statements about God and about Jesus in each of them. That is, a Christian could argue that such books, despite their laudatory statements about God and Christ, work against the cause of Christ (and therefore in support of the devil's agenda) by teaching confusing and contradictory ideas about Christ. The fact is that each of these books, in different ways, calls into question the reliability and adequacy of the New Testament writings' teachings about Jesus Christ. Sometimes subtly, and sometimes blatantly, these pseudo-scriptures attack the biblical foundations of the Christian faith, challenging the historic Christian view of the person of Jesus Christ.

The Book of Mormon, from an orthodox Christian perspective, falls into this same category of pseudo-scriptures that undermine confidence in the trustworthiness of the revelation of Jesus Christ found in the New Testament. It is one of a long list of supposedly inspired writings appearing in modern times that claim to "restore" the true understanding of the teachings and life of Jesus. In some cases these are supposedly new, modern scriptures or inspired writings, such as *Heaven and Hell* (by Emanuel Swedenborg, 1758), *Doctrine & Covenants* (mostly by Joseph Smith, 1828-1844), *Science and Health* (by Mary Baker Eddy, 1875), or *A Course in Miracles* (by Helen Schucman, 1976, supposedly dictated to her by Jesus himself!). In other cases these writings are modern fictions purporting to be rediscovered ancient scriptures, including the *Book of Mormon* (1830) and the *Book of Abraham* (1842), the *Archko Volume* (1884), the *Life of Issa* (1894), the *Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ* (1908), and the *Secret Gospel of Mark* (1973).

While the Book of Mormon is probably the most subtle of these pseudo-scriptures in its deviations from the biblical teachings about God and Jesus Christ, it still falls into this category. The Book of Mormon questions the

completeness and integrity of the Bible, teaches that Jesus started a separate church in the Americas and that the church there and in the Old World had become apostate, and directs its readers to view Joseph Smith, its modern publisher, as the divinely chosen instrument of the restoration of the true Christian faith. The fact that it generally uses traditional-sounding Christian language about God and Christ makes it all the more potent as a means for drawing people from traditional Christian churches away from a faith resting solidly on the foundation of the Bible.

We have good reasons, then, to dispute Callister's second premise. It may very well be that the Book of Mormon is "of the devil" in a loose sense. That is, it may be a tool or instrument supporting or helping to advance the devil's agenda of undermining confidence in the Bible as the fully trustworthy and reliable word of God and of leading people away from a biblically sound understanding of the Christian faith.

### Conclusion

I have argued that the first premise of the Richards-Callister "God or the devil" argument is false: the claim that the Book of Mormon must be either of God or of the devil ignores the possibility that the Book of Mormon might simply be the work of man, a product of human deceit and ambition. It does not follow that if the Book of Mormon is not directly inspired by the devil then it must be directly inspired by God. In a broader or looser sense, a book might be "of God" in some respects but "of the devil" in other respects; that is, it might be a mixture of truth and error, of good and evil.

With regard to the second premise, namely, that the Book of Mormon cannot be of the devil because it encourages faith in Christ, I have argued that many books purport to encourage faith in Christ but undermine a sound, biblically authentic faith in Christ. To the extent that the Book of Mormon is such a book, it might very well be described, in the looser sense, as "of the devil." Thus, the second premise of the argument is also highly questionable.

Since the first premise is false and the second premise is at least highly questionable, the God-or-devil dilemma argument for the Book of Mormon fails. From an orthodox Christian perspective, the Book of Mormon is a mixture of truth and error. After all, much of the Book of Mormon is copied, often nearly verbatim, from the Bible! Where the Book of Mormon repeats what the Bible says, it is true. Where the Book of Mormon makes statements that reflect biblical truths and values (as it often does), even though it is not quoting the Bible, here again the Book of Mormon may be viewed as containing significant truth. Unfortunately, the Book of Mormon presents these true statements in the framework of a false historical narrative designed to undermine the integrity and trustworthiness of the Bible, to indict traditional Christianity as apostate, and to present Joseph Smith as a modern channel of divine revelation through which true Christianity is being restored. For that reason, despite all of the true and good things one can find within the Book of Mormon, we cannot accept its claim to be a restored scripture. Without going to the extreme of denouncing everything in the Book of Mormon as of the devil, we therefore conclude that as a whole the Book of Mormon is not of God.

### NOTES

[1] LeGrand Richards, *A Marvelous Work and a Wonder*, rev. and expanded ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1976), 79; see also D. Michael Quinn, "They Served: The Richards Legacy in the Church," *Ensign*, Jan. 1980, 25.

[2] C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), 55-56; see also *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 23-24; *Miracles: A Preliminary Inquiry*, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1978 paperback ed.), 109; and especially "What Are We to Make of Jesus Christ?" in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 156-60. The cogency of the argument is currently the subject of vigorous debate among philosophers and theologians.

[3] Tad R. Callister, "**The Book of Mormon—a Book from God**," *Ensign*, Nov. 2011, 74-75.

[4] *Ibid.*, 74.

[5] *Ibid.*, 75.

[6] *Gospel of Judas*, trans. Rodolphe Kasser, Marvin Meyer, and Gregor Wurst (National Geographic Society, 2006).

[7] *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*, trans. 'Abdullah Yusuf 'Ali, 11th ed. (Beltsville, MD: Amana Publications, 2004), 3.45.

[8] Mary Baker Eddy, *Science and Health, with Key to the Scriptures* (Boston: First Church of Christ, Scientist, numerous editions [orig. 1875]), 138.17.

[9] "Pilate's Report," in *The Archko Volume, or, the Archaeological Writings of the Sanhedrin and Talmuds of the Jews* [by William Dennes Mahan] (Philadelphia: Antiquarian Book Company, 1913), 132, 146-47. The God-or-Devil Dilemma Argument for the Book of Mormon—page 8

[10] Levi H. Dowling, *The Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ* (London: L. N. Fowler; Los Angeles: Eva S. Dowling, 1911), 180.8-9.



