

SECTION 91

FAITH: Mormonism | TEXT: Doctrine and Covenants | VOLUME: 2013 | AUTHOR: Joseph Smith

OVERVIEW

Received on March 9, 1833, in Kirtland, Ohio, this section addresses Joseph Smith's inquiry regarding the Apocrypha while he was engaged in his revision of the Bible (Joseph Smith Translation). The revelation asserts that the Apocrypha contains many truths and is 'mostly translated correctly,' but also contains many 'interpolations by the hands of men' that are untrue. Consequently, the Lord instructs Smith that it is not needful to translate these books. Instead, the text establishes a subjective epistemological standard for the reader: those enlightened by the Spirit can obtain benefit by discerning the truth, while those without the Spirit cannot be benefited. This section is significant as it formally removes the Apocrypha from the LDS canon while simultaneously validating the concept of selective, Spirit-guided reading of non-canonical texts.

KEY FIGURES

The Lord (Speaker), Joseph Smith (Recipient)

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. SUBJECTIVE EPISTEMOLOGY (DISCERNMENT BY SPIRIT)

Assertion: The truthfulness of a text is determined by the spiritual enlightenment of the reader rather than the objective nature of the text itself.

"Whoso is enlightened by the Spirit shall obtain benefit therefrom; And whoso receiveth not by the Spirit, cannot be benefited. (D&C 91:5-6)"

Evangelical Comparison: In Evangelical theology, the inspiration and authority of Scripture are intrinsic to the text (2 Timothy 3:16) and determined by historical canonization criteria (apostolicity, orthodoxy, catholicity), not by the subjective reaction of the reader. D&C 91 shifts the locus of authority from the text to the reader's experience. While Evangelicals agree the natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:14), they do not teach that a text's ***validity*** or ***truth*** fluctuates based on the reader's feelings. This Mormon doctrine lays the groundwork for the 'burning in the bosom' epistemology used to validate the Book of Mormon.

2. TEXTUAL CORRUPTION VIA INTERPOLATION

Assertion: Ancient religious texts (specifically the Apocrypha) have been altered by human hands, mixing truth with error.

"There are many things contained therein that are not true, which are interpolations by the hands of men. (D&C 91:2)"

Evangelical Comparison: Evangelical scholars view the Apocrypha as valuable historical literature (intertestamental history) but not inspired Scripture (Theopneustos). They reject it because it was not part of the Hebrew Bible and not cited as Scripture by Jesus or the Apostles. Joseph Smith's revelation rejects it on different grounds: that it is physically corrupted ('interpolations'). This reflects a broader Mormon hermeneutic that the Bible and related texts are unreliable due to transmission errors, necessitating a modern prophet to 'fix' or judge them.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Partial

Theological Gap: The surface-level agreement (rejection of the Apocrypha) masks a deep epistemological divide. For the Evangelical, the canon is closed and recognized by the historical consensus of the faithful regarding apostolic origins. For the Mormon, the canon is fluid and subject to the editing, approval, or rejection of a living prophet. D&C 91 exemplifies the Mormon doctrine that the 'Living Oracle' (Prophet) is superior to the 'Dead Letter' (Ancient Scripture). Furthermore, the instruction to the reader to use the Spirit to filter truth introduces a Gnostic-like element where truth is hidden and requires special spiritual illumination to extract, contrasting with the perspicuity (clarity) of Scripture in Protestant theology.

Shared Values:

Rejection of the Apocrypha as Canon; Belief that the Spirit aids in understanding spiritual things

Friction Points:

1. [Critical] Sola Scriptura – Subordinates the written text to the judgment of a modern prophet and subjective spiritual experience.
2. [Major] Theology Proper (Holy Spirit) – Reduces the Holy Spirit's role to a 'truth detector' for extra-biblical texts rather than the witness of the Gospel.

Semantic Warnings:

"Translated"

In Text: In Joseph Smith's usage (JST), 'translate' often meant supernatural revision, restoration, or commentary, not necessarily linguistic translation from source languages.

Evangelical: Rendering text from one language to another (e.g., Greek to English).

Example: When D&C 91 says 'mostly translated correctly,' it refers to the English KJV Apocrypha, implying the English text is accurate but the underlying content has interpolations.

"The Spirit"

In Text: A mechanism for discerning truth from error in any text; a feeling of enlightenment.

Evangelical: The Third Person of the Trinity who testifies of Christ and illuminates the meaning of the inspired Word.

Example: In D&C 91, the Spirit acts as a content filter for the Apocrypha.

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Not explicitly defined in this text.

How Attained: Implies that spiritual benefit is contingent on possessing the Spirit.

Basis of Assurance: Confidence comes from personal revelation/enlightenment.

Comparison to Sola Fide: No direct conflict with Sola Fide in this specific text, though the reliance on personal revelation to navigate truth replaces the sufficiency of the Word.

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

1. Do not translate the Apocrypha (D&C 91:3)
2. Let the reader understand (D&C 91:4)

Implicit Obligations:

1. Seek the Spirit to discern truth in reading materials
2. Accept Joseph Smith's authority to determine the boundaries of canon

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. When D&C 91 says the Spirit helps us distinguish truth from error, how do we know if our feelings are actually the Spirit?
2. If the Apocrypha has 'interpolations by men,' how do we know the Bible doesn't? What is the standard for trusting a text?
3. Why do you think God told Joseph the Apocrypha was 'mostly translated correctly' but the Bible needed a major revision (JST)?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The Need for a Truth Filter – The text acknowledges we need a way to separate truth from error. We agree. However, God gave us His objective Word as that filter. [Hebrews 4:12 (The Word is a discerner of thoughts and intents)]

Spiritual Weight:

1. Uncertainty/Subjectivity [Moderate] – The believer is burdened with the responsibility of being the final arbiter of truth for every text they read. If they don't 'feel' the Spirit, they may doubt their own spiritual standing.
2. Dependency on Hierarchy [Mild] – While the text invites the reader to discern, it ultimately reinforces reliance on the Prophet (Joseph) who has the final say on what is or isn't worth translating/reading.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Direct Revelation (for Joseph) and Pneumatic Intuition (for the reader).

Verification Method: The presence of 'the Spirit' while reading serves as the verification of truth.

Evangelical Contrast: Biblical epistemology tests spirits against the objective standard of written Scripture (1 John 4:1, Acts 17:11). D&C 91 suggests the Spirit validates the text, creating a circular loop where feelings determine truth.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: March 9, 1833

Authorship: Joseph Smith

Textual Issues: This revelation was received during the 'translation' of the Bible. It provided a convenient exit strategy for Smith to avoid the arduous task of revising the Apocrypha.