

Protestantism's embrace of federal authority to control one religion has proved to be a slippery slope for all American religions, it seems to me that the slide began much earlier than the antipolygamy campaign. Do not its American roots, as opposed to Reformation and Enlightenment roots, lie in the first amendment itself, which subordinated church to state, making the duty of citizens to the state superior to the believer's to the church? Only with the shift in the pre-Civil War balance of state and federal authority does this become obvious through the post-Civil War anti-polygamy campaign. I should say, of course, that this is obvious only in retrospect. *The Mormon Question* details the naiveté of the Protestant reformers who facilitated a constitutional order which, it seems to me, leaves not merely the marginalized but also, and more likely, the mainstream descendants of nineteenth-century evangelicalism feeling oppressed by federal reg-

ulation of their religious activities and beliefs, such as public prayer and creation science. Meanwhile, the Mormons remain an oligarchy, if not a "Kingdom," in the West, with considerable local autonomy over non-religious matters and the ability to use federal authority over religious matters to stymie "general Christianity," as one of their members recently did in a complaint to the Supreme Court over school prayer.² As mentioned, the ironies in and suggested by this book are legion.

Scholars of American religion assume religious disestablishment exacted no cost except to minority traditions or so-called "New Religious Movements." But good books inspire good questions, and Gordon's is no exception. *The Mormon Question* invites us to consider what is "free" about American religion: who is free, and when? And, finally, to ask a question we are scarcely able to conceive: what was the cost to religion of religious disestablishment?

A Landmark in Mormon Thought

Blake T. Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought, Volume I: The Attributes of God*. (Salt Lake City: Gregg Kofford Books, 2002), 485 pp.

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It is difficult to make comparisons between previous works in LDS philosophy and theology and Blake Ostler's *Exploring Mormon Thought:*

The Attributes of God. This is the first volume in a projected trilogy that will include a second volume on the problems of theism and a third that will leave the mode of analytic philosophy and take a more phenomenological approach to Mormon thought. One could easily say that this is the most important book in Mormon philosophy of religion since Sterling McMurrin's *Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion*, or one could say that it is the most speculative Mormon theol-

2. See *Santa Fe Independent School District v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290 (2000).

ogy since Orson Pratt. On the other hand, one might also say that despite its boldness, it takes Mormon theology back toward a reconciliation with ideas of the trinity that are more traditionally Christian and that it doesn't even mention that most radical of Mormon ideas, a female deity. One thing is clear: there really has never before been anything like this book in Mormon circles. One might argue, though, that this is primarily a book for Christian philosophers of an analytic persuasion. In the preface, Ostler admits that the book began as notes for his own use; only later did he decide to attempt to clarify "the Mormon concept of God for responsible theologians, philosophers, and professionals outside the Mormon religion" (p. xi).

It is somewhat of a miracle that this book exists. Ostler is not a professional academic, but a Salt Lake City attorney who studies and writes philosophy at night. Like the diplomat/philosopher Gottfried Leibniz, the lens grinder/philosopher Baruch Spinoza, and the personal secretary/philosopher David Hume, Ostler is quite good at his vocation. That Greg Kofford Books would publish *Exploring Mormon Thought* as one of its first ventures is a brave and daring gamble.

The book aims at two audiences: thoughtful Mormons and philosophers of religion. The Mormon audience would seem obvious, but much of the volume is highly technical and there are few Mormon analytic philosophers; the average reader will get

bogged down in many of the arguments that assume familiarity with the work of analytic philosophers of religion in the Anglo-American tradition. Part of the book's major import is that it serves as an LDS response to some of the recent overtures by such evangelical critics of Mormonism as Carl Mosser, Stephen Parrish, and Francis Beckwith. Beckwith and Mosser's anthology *The New Mormon Challenge*¹ includes an array of quite competent Anglo-American evangelical philosophers of religion and is an improvement on earlier work, but it is hardly irenic in character. *Exploring Mormon Thought* goes along way toward filling this gap.

I hope that Ostler's book finds a wide audience within the church as well: anyone who thinks seriously about the meaning of LDS doctrine should read it. It is a book that will take some time to unpack and some time for its influence to be felt. My own training is far from analytic philosophy of religion, but I will return again and again to this book when I want to explain or think about Mormon views on certain key ideas on freedom, divine knowledge and foreknowledge, divine power, divine possibility or passivity (capacity to be changed in one's inmost being by relation to another), and temporality. I have already read much of this book twice: a first time, when I tried to get through it quickly to write this review, then a second time while writing the review. Again and again I found that

1. Francis J. Beckwith, Carl Mosser, and Paul Owen, eds., *The New Mormon Challenge: Responding to the Latest Defenses of a Fast-Growing Movement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002).

my initial objections to Ostler's explanations of LDS doctrine were answered in depth elsewhere in the text.

This rich book far exceeds anything that I can say in a short review. While parts of it are quite difficult, several chapters and sections in chapters will reward the educated reader with a systematic attempt to provide a reasoned account of LDS theism. The first three chapters—"The Meaning of God in Mormon Thought," "The Apostasy and Concepts of Perfection," and "The Restoration and Systematic Theologies"—are all quite accessible and provide an overview of what Ostler will be doing in the book. Chapter two contrasts process philosophy's dynamic conception of God's perfection with the absolutist notions of traditional theism. Like the process philosophers Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne, Ostler sees traditional theism, with its impassible, changeless God, as a Greek invasion of the more personal Hebraic ideas of the divine being. I found chapter three's summaries of the thought of Joseph Smith, Parley and Orson Pratt, John A. Widstoe, and B. H. Roberts especially helpful. Ostler even discusses Bruce R. McConkie's neo-absolutist Mormonism and includes a nice summary comparison of what he calls a Dynamic Perfection conception of God (Widstoe/Roberts) and a Static Perfection conception (Pratt/McConkie) (pp. 99-100). From these three chapters, the concluding two sections of chapter thirteen, and all of chapter fourteen, "A Mormon Christology," which is a very original interpretation of the meaning of Christ in LDS theology, a reader will get a nice idea of

Mormon theism and Christology. If a significant number of people were to read at least this much, Gospel Doctrine class discussions and late night Mormon debates about the meaning of the apostasy, God, the atonement, freedom, and divine foreknowledge would move to a new level.

In the next chapters Ostler discusses, critiques, and offers Mormon alternatives to various interpretations of the traditional attributes of God. The richness of the book is found in these chapters, but this is also where the difficulty increases. I would advise the reader to persevere, even if he or she skims through the fine logical distinctions, because each chapter has its own particular delights. Chapter four, "Maximal Divine Power," discusses such topics as the Book of Mormon contention that if God's mercy were to rob justice it would be a form of coercion and "God would cease to be God." Ostler appeals to Roberts' generic idea of God from *The Mormon Doctrine of Deity*, saying that if "God" is seen as a title, it is at least logically possible that an individual God could cease to be God though there would always be someone who would be God (p. 109). He continues: "We have faith in the Father's goodness not because it is logically impossible for him to do anything wrong, but because of the excellence and fullness of his character" (p. 110). In other words, there is not a metaphysical guarantee of God's goodness, but God has chosen and continues to choose righteousness and non-coercion. Ostler even has a very good discussion of miracles in the context of his mainly non-coercive idea of God's power—an important problem for

Mormons to consider (pp. 129-133).

Chapter five, "Models of Divine Knowledge," discusses providence and God's foreknowledge. Like the process theologians, Ostler takes the position that God is omniscient in so far as God has perfect knowledge of past and present. But the future simply "is not." God may know all possibilities but not which possibilities will be actualized (pp. 117, 152-153). To think differently is to reduce time to space. The future is open. This discussion continues in chapter six, "The Incompatibility of Free Will and Infallible Foreknowledge," where Ostler discusses the consequences of this concept of foreknowledge for both human and divine freedom. For example, "Simple foreknowledge thus has the strange consequence of binding God to a determinate future before He can providentially get involved. It follows immediately that God cannot plan or deliberate about the future—or even his own future acts" (p. 147). Ostler notes that based on D&C 130: 6-7, many Mormons interpret God's knowledge as an eternal present as if time were space and God sees the whole as you or I would look at a painting. But this is inconsistent with verses 4-5, which talk about God's time. Time is creative: it is new at each moment. Ostler proposes that it makes more sense to say that God's time can be measured from God's perspective than that he exists in an eternal now (p. 151).

He continues the critique of these more traditional models of divine omniscience in chapter seven, "Divine Foreknowledge and the Mormon Concept of Free Agency." Here he contrasts the Mormon concept of free

agency, which he sees as libertarian, with traditional theistic notions that free will is compatible with either causal or divine determinism. For example, Augustine defines free will in the following way: "We do by our free will whatsoever we know and feel to be done by us only because we will it." This position asserts that our act is free insofar as it is in line with our desire or, as Jonathan Edwards says, that freedom is "the power, or advantage that anyone has, to do as he pleases. Or in other words, his being free from hindrance or impediment in the way of doing, or condoning in any respect as he wills" (p. 202). Like all good libertarians, Ostler sees this as a very weak notion of free will in which one does not choose one's desires; they were either formed *ex nihilo* by God or in the causal chain that stretches back to the big bang. Such a notion denies our most concrete experiences of choice and, if we are theists, makes God ultimately responsible not only for our sins but for all the evil in the universe. Readers interested in the Mormon concept of agency should read this chapter closely.

Chapters eight, nine, and ten—"Denying Entailment," "Denying That God's Past Knowledge is Fixed," and "God's Contingent Knowledge"—are highly technical, very interesting discussions of, among other things, omniscience and time. Ostler argues that contingent omniscience is consistent with scripture (pp. 299-310). Readers interested in philosophical and theological interpretations of recent discussions in physics and philosophy will find chapters ten and eleven ("Time, Timelessness and Omnitemporality")

pertinent. Ostler thinks "it is precisely the modern understanding of space-time which demonstrates the uniqueness of the Mormon understanding of God's relation to space-time and the temporal world"(p. 331). God is omnitemporal, not limited by our own temporal dimensions, not in our measured time. His being includes within it all temporal frames (p. 360).

Chapter twelve, "Immutability and Impassibility," discusses God's relation to fellow beings. Ostler gives a very nice definition of impassibility and discusses the shortcoming of traditional theism's view that God's perfection means stony impassivity. A personal relation—such as that described in the Biblical story of Abraham dickering with God over the fate of Sodom or the Doctrine and Covenants' "come let us reason together"—demands a divine being who is passible, capable of change, who enters a dialogue with humanity, and who even weeps (p. 400).

The final two chapters are very important. In "Problems of Conventional Christology" and "A Mormon Christology" Ostler develops a theory of atonement and Christology that is consistent with the Latter-day Saint belief in freedom and non-coercion. Ostler does an admirable job here, opting for a largely kenotic interpretation of Christ. It is precisely these chapters that should spawn the greatest discussion in LDS circles. While I think he heads in the right direction, he doesn't travel far enough from traditional Christianity into what is our main heresy. Ostler sees the humanization of God and the divinization of humanity, but on this issue I think a

more Buddhist understanding of *kenosis* (self emptying) than traditional Christian one might help. Christ is only filled by all things because the self-emptying of his divine status leaves him open to others (Alma 7:11-12). He comes to know what suffering is as a human being. Mormons might compare Jehovah's response to Job to the resurrected Jehovah's response to Joseph Smith in D&C 122. It is only in the emptying of the self that we may be enlightened by all things and become like Christ and God. Ostler stops short of the boldness of the King Follett Discourse in that he would preserve something of the ontological difference between God and the world. This is evident in his discussion of the social trinity and particularly his definition of apotheosis:

Apotheosis Humans may share the same divinity as the divine person through grace by becoming one with the divine persons in the same sense that they are one with each other. However, humans are eternally subordinate to and dependent upon their relationship of loving unity with the divine person for their status as "gods." By acting as one with the Godhead, deified humans will share fully in the "godly attributes" of knowledge, power, and glory of God. (p. 464)

Ostler has gone a long way toward breaking down the master/slave relationship between God and humanity, but he retains some of the hierarchy that should be transcended in his concept of relation and kenosis. But this is not so much a critique as a disagreement. I suspect many if not most

contemporary Latter-day Saints may prefer Ostler's very creative interpretation of the relation of God and humanity.

There is a significant absence in this book that should not have been left for the later volumes, even though the major purpose is to engage non-Mormon analytic philosophers of religion. There is no mention of the Mother in heaven. While it is true this is a mystery insufficiently revealed, Ostler has speculated boldly in the best philosophical sense of the term. Why not say something? This could be done in rela-

tion to the Old Testament feminine holy wisdom that is also found in Mosiah, to the 1909 First Presidency statement on the "Origin of Man," or, most famously, to Eliza R. Snow's poem and hymn. There is enough material in the canon that this important doctrine should be included in a book on the attributes of God. As it is, Ostler's account of the social trinity sounds like a boy's club. Hopefully this discussion is to come in the later volumes of what promises to be the most significant contribution to LDS philosophy in a long time.

Hugh Nibley

Hugh Nibley: "A Consecrated Life," by Boyd Jay Petersen (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2002), 480pp.

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This authorized biography of one of Mormonism's greatest minds and most prolific scholars is a wonderfully accessible entry point to the life and work of Hugh Nibley. Boyd Jay Petersen, married to Nibley's youngest daughter, Zina, resolved to document Nibley's life when he realized no one else was doing the job. As an in-law, Petersen has an insider's view without the complex baggage of having grown up in the shadow of this Mormon celebrity. He does not claim objectivity but he is balanced. Although he handles Nibley's shortcomings and inconsistencies gently and sensitively, he

does not sweep them under the rug either. This is a respectful, honest biography, not a hagiography. Petersen used interviews with Nibley and many who knew him, as well as Nibley's scholarship and correspondence as source material and invited his wife to write the foreword: a brief and personable collection of memories about growing up with Hugh Nibley as a father.

The earlier chapters on Nibley's forebears and childhood are a little slow-moving but the book soon becomes a page-turner sprinkled with generous portions of Nibley's self-effacing wit and elegant turns of phrase. Petersen alternates his chapters between chronological biography (childhood, mission to Germany, military service in World War II, and so on) and topical themes in Nibley's life (social criticism, faith, scholarship, Book of Mormon, temples, and so on). The weakness of this approach is the occa-