

are nevertheless “dialogical in nature, products of a consistent and patient exposure and imaginative working out of the subject matter, in conversation with others sharing the same general concerns” (xi). In light of the number of authors in this book who first engaged Mormon thought from an antagonistic and confrontational perspective, and who now seek instead to engage it in more open and considerate ways, perhaps no greater evidence of the fruit of David Paulsen’s tireless efforts to generate thoughtful and respectful interfaith dialogue between LDS and non-LDS thinkers can be found than this fine book itself.

Note

1. Catholic theologian Stephen H. Webb’s excellent recent works “Mormon Christianity: What Other Christians Can Learn from the Latter-day Saints” and “Jesus Christ, Eternal God: Heavenly Flesh and the Metaphysics of Matter” strike very similar chords and advance a very similar case by way of a careful analysis of Mormon doctrines of divine materiality.

God’s “Body” and Why It Matters

Stephen H. Webb. *Mormon Christianity: What Other Christians Can Learn from the Latter-day Saints*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. 232 pp. Hardcover: \$29.95. ISBN: 9780199316816.

Reviewed by John W. Morehead

Stephen Webb is a Roman Catholic scholar who has made a great effort to understand and interact with Mormonism in sympathetic ways. In his prior volume on this topic, *Jesus Christ, Eternal God: Heavenly Flesh and the Metaphysics of Matter* (Oxford University Press, 2011), Webb considered the possibility of the materiality and divine embodiment of God by way of elements in the history of Christian thought, specifically “heavenly flesh” Christology. In *Mormon Christianity: What Other Christians Can Learn from the Latter-day Saints*, he narrows his focus to consider Mormon materialist metaphysics and what this might mean for his own Catholicism, as well as the doctrine of the rest of historic Christendom.

In contrast with classical theism where God is an immaterial spirit, Webb entertains the idea that God possesses a material body (5). He wonders whether this might be a possibility for traditional Christians as they consider the implications of Joseph Smith's interpretation of his "First Vision" which provided him with an "insight into the materiality of the divine" (9). This has resulted in a Mormon metaphysical teaching on matter wherein God is not only embodied and material, but also, "Most fundamentally speaking, spirit and matter are not opposites at all. Spirit and matter complement each other and are not ultimately different in substance" (34).

Webb recognizes the serious implications of this for traditional Christianity, if true, in that it "calls for the revision of nearly every Christian belief" (124). For this reason a thoughtful analysis from the perspective of traditional Christianity is in order. At several points Webb calls for civil and respectful engagement of Mormonism (23, 113–14, 159), and notes that unfortunately "skeptics can be tempted to reduce it to a simple set of claims for quick criticism and polemical rebuttal" (23). This reviewer eschews such approaches, and what follows is a respectful and thoughtful critique of Webb's thesis incorporating Mormon ideas. In the review that follows I bring the perspective of an Evangelical scholar with a background in Mormon studies, appreciation for interreligious engagement, and a desire for religious traditions to critically engage each other in civility. The following areas of critique are especially significant to traditional Christianity both Protestant and Catholic, in my mind.

In order for traditional Christians to embrace Mormon materialist metaphysics, it will need to be seen as compatible with biblical teaching. This is true for traditional Christians in its historic branches, including Roman Catholics, but particularly for Protestants, and most notably Evangelicals, where the Bible holds a place of special authority in matters of faith. In the instances where Webb mentions the Bible in relation to divine embodiment, he draws upon a literal hermeneutic, such as the creation of human beings in God's image (8–9, 104), and Old Testament texts referring to people "seeing" God (84–85). Webb wonders

whether these might be examples of God revealing his physical form. This hermeneutic is surprising in that it is an unsophisticated method found in Christian fundamentalism, an expression of Christianity that Webb seems to find lacking (122, 176), and which cannot be the basis for a restoration of the church (164).

In response, there are several dimensions to biblical interpretation. In its ancient near eastern context, the gods were believed to have several bodies, but scholars recognize that the dominant strains of Old Testament monotheism rejected this idea.¹ It is difficult to believe that Webb would accept multiple bodies for each of the persons of the Godhead. Then there is the conceptualization behind the text. For the Hebrews, Old Testament anthropomorphisms express God's "being and properties" or qualities, not his form.² Although Webb takes exception to anthropomorphism (85), it played a part in Hebraic thinking. In addition, they emphasized divine action rather than abstract theorizing about the nature of being. Then there is the significance of religious communities to the hermeneutical process. One cannot cite the biblical text without consideration of the religious communities in which it is interpreted according to internal assumptions. Beyond its original contexts and readers, scriptural texts take their meaning within religious communities, whether that of ancient Israel, the branches of Christendom, or Mormonism. Webb would be better served by wrestling more carefully with a host of hermeneutical issues related to the Old Testament than by citing texts based upon a literal fundamentalist interpretation.

Another area of critique relates to Mormon materialist conceptions of the incarnation of Christ. In Webb's view, "[Joseph] Smith expands the mystery of the incarnation without diminishing it in any significant way" (123). He speculates that in Mormon materialism "the incarnation is a specification (or material intensification) of [Christ's] premortal state, not the first (and only) time that God and matter unite" (123). But for traditional Christians, the incarnation is best expressed in a biblical text like John 1, specifically verse 14: "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us" (KJV). This passage brings together several Jewish ideas related to God's presence among his people, including Torah (the

first five books of the Bible), the Temple, divine Wisdom, and the Shekinah (the presence of God through his glory. In so doing it is reminiscent of both the Jewish creation story and God's presence in the Exodus wandering and Temple. For traditional Christians Jesus is the embodiment of Judaism's incarnational symbols so that in Jesus the living and invisible God is present in flesh with his people. In so doing, the Word took on something he did not previously possess, a material body, and "was made flesh."

The final area of critique relates to the sources for Smith's ideas on metaphysical materialism. Webb reminds us that it was Smith's experience of God in the First Vision that informed his materialist metaphysics, "not speculations about nature or analysis of matter" (35), nor was it historical or theological reflection on early Christianity and ancient Judaism. Such visionary experiences were common in Smith's time and region of the country, including among the Methodists.³ But why did Smith interpret his vision in ways that would lead to a materialist metaphysics (84) that Methodists and others having similar experiences did not interpret in similar fashion?

The answer comes by way of the influence of various esoteric ideas. Webb is aware of such connections, and he devotes an entire chapter (one of the longest) to "The Magic of Being Mormon." In particular he discusses Smith's critics who have pointed to the work of John Brooke in *The Refiner's Fire* and who argue that the Prophet's innovative thinking arose out of hermeticism. Webb dismisses this idea, stating that there is a closer connection to Old Testament magic, and that Smith cannot be construed as a Gnostic. Brooke's thesis has elicited strong and mixed reactions, including negative responses from the academic community and within some segments of Mormonism,⁴ but it cannot be dismissed in totality.

In addition, Webb would benefit from a broader understanding of esoteric thought in a reconsideration of the influence of esotericism on Smith's teachings. The connection between Smith and esotericism does not only come from critics. Scholars such as Catherine Albanese have connected the dots between Smith and American metaphysical religions. Harold Bloom views Smith

as a modern Gnostic in his book *The American Religion*, and goes on to state that his conception of God is like that form of Jewish mysticism found in the Kabbalists. And in an extensive essay in *Dialogue*, Lance Owens has made the case for the influence of esotericism and hermeticism on Smith, in particular the influence of the Kabbalah on his views of deity.⁵ In another essay, Owens cites Brooke's research, noting "the striking parallels between the Mormon concepts of coequality of matter and spirit" and the "philosophical traditions of alchemy and Hermeticism."⁶ Owens also speaks of "the importance of Hermeticism in the evolution of early American religious consciousness and political culture,"⁷ and the "intersection between dispensational restorationism and the Hermetic occult."⁸ A good argument can be made that Mormonism's materialist metaphysics finds its roots in esotericism forged in synthesis with the restorationism of nineteenth century America, rather than in "neglected practices and overlooked beliefs from ancient Christianity" (181).

Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant Christians will disagree with Webb's thesis and the Mormon materialism it encourages them to embrace. But as John Bracht reminds us,⁹ we must pause to remember its wonder and significance for Mormons. To them, the immaterial God of Christendom seems less personal and real than the Man of Holiness found in the First Vision and the Plan of Salvation. For traditional Christians God is intensely personal without a glorified body, from Israel's love affair with the invisible God who was not to be represented in physical images to the early Christians who sensed the post-Resurrection presence of Jesus in power through the Spirit. In all of this, even while rejecting Webb's thesis, it must be acknowledged that his book provides thought-provoking ideas for conversations between traditional Christians and Mormons.

Notes

1. Benjamin D. Sommer, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

2. Thorleif Boman, *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1970), 101 (cf. 109).

3. Christopher C. Jones, “‘We Latter-day Saints are Methodists’: The Influence of Methodism on Early Mormon Religiosity,” (MA thesis, Brigham Young University, 2009).

4. “Thoughts about the Academic Community’s Response to John Brooke’s Refiner’s Fire,” in Jan Shipp, *Sojourner in the Promised Land: Forty Years among the Mormons* (Champaign, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 2000).

5. Lance S. Owens, “Joseph Smith and Kabbalah: The Occult Connection,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 27, no. 3 (Fall 1994): 117–94.

6. Lance S. Owens, “Joseph Smith: America’s Hermetic Prophet,” *Gnosis Magazine* 35 (Spring 1995): 63.

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*

9. John L. Bracht, *Man of Holiness: The Mormon Search for a Personal God* (Salt Lake City: Sacred Tribes Press, 2010). Expanded electronic edition of 1988 MA thesis, University of Sydney.

