

### **Dialogue at the Crossroads**

Jacob T. Baker, ed. *Mormonism at the Crossroads of Philosophy and Theology: Essays in Honor of David L. Paulsen*. Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2012. xliii + 351 pp. Paper: \$31.95. ISBN: 9781589581920.

*Reviewed by Edwin E. Gantt*

This excellent collection of essays not only honors one of the most influential LDS thinkers of the past forty years, David L. Paulsen, but does so as a beautiful example of the very sort of critically reflective and respectful interfaith dialogue that he worked so hard to encourage throughout his career as both a teacher and a writer. As such, this volume contains a variety of thoughtful essays that cover a wide range of topics in areas as diverse as how Mormonism might best be classified as a theological system, the nature of transcendence and the meaning of deification in Mormon thought, the question of divine embodiment in LDS and traditional Christian thought, the challenges that Fideism may present to an ostensibly “atheological” Mormonism, LDS contributions to contemporary philosophical debates in creation theology, whether an “Evangelical Mormonism” is a viable possibility, and what sorts of connections there may be between the way scholars have explained Jesus Christ and the way they explain Joseph Smith. As such, this volume represents a very impressive contribution to the burgeoning interfaith dialogue between LDS and non-LDS scholars, both in terms of its intellectual rigor and the deeply respectful and faith-affirming tone it exhibits throughout.

The unique combination of breadth of topic and depth of analysis found in many of the essays in this volume speaks both to the sophistication and insightfulness of their individual authors and, perhaps even more significantly, to the profound influence that Paulsen’s work has had over the years in setting an appropriate tone for these sorts of discussions, as well as in establishing an open and hospitable intellectual environment in

which they might take place. Indeed, one thing that readers may be most struck by as they work through the various essays in this collection is the frequency with which so many of the authors take occasion to note not only Paulsen's impressive academic and intellectual contributions, and the influence his thinking has had on their own, but also the genuinely loving and welcoming spirit with which he invites others to participate in careful analysis of some of the most weighty issues in theology, philosophy, and Christian living. If this volume does anything right—and, quite honestly, it does many things right in many ways and in many areas—it is that it embodies in each of its essays that very same loving, open, and yet always seriously critical spirit that characterizes Professor Paulsen's own work over the past four decades.

Following a detailed introduction that provides a helpful overview of each of the seventeen essays, the volume begins with a brief but well-focused biographical essay by Daniel Barron and Jacob Baker on Professor Paulsen's personal and academic life. Among a number of choice nuggets of insight into Paulsen's mind and history contained in this brief biography, one that stands out as perhaps most revealing about his own relationship to the work of apologetics and theological reflection to which he devoted so much of his life is this penetrating comment he made in an interview with one of the chapter's authors: "My faith in God is grounded in his self-disclosures, not in logical inferences from philosophically constructed premises" (xxxix). In the work of apologetics, where hard-nosed logical critique and relentless rational defense are so often taken to be the name of the game, Paulsen readily admits that the tools of logic and critical thinking are just that: tools. For Paulsen, one does not proceed to knowledge of God by means of logic-splicing and rational analysis, but through direct experience with God in deeply personal ways. For Paulsen, as for his intellectual guide Kierkegaard, knowledge of God is deeply relational in nature, and, thus, principally grounded in personal, revelatory experience with God. The categories and methods of logic—indeed the entire project of formal apologetics—though vital to the task of defending faith and nurturing a healthy intellectual life through

thoughtful reflection on the meaning and coherence of religious doctrines and the meaning of God, always come later, somewhat late to dinner, one might say, though certainly still welcome to the feast. Such an understanding of the nature of apologetics and philosophical reflection, as well as the inherent limitations (and subtle seductions) of logic and reason, helps illuminate the origins of Paulsen's personal and professional style in both encouraging and embodying a loving and respectful approach to interfaith dialogue.

While each of the essays in this volume is worthy of commentary and commendation, in the interests of brevity—and in light of the fact that the book itself provides excellent introductory summaries of each essay—I will mention only a select few here that I believe may be of particular interest to the reader who might consider investing in this volume.

In the opening essay of the collection, Carl Mosser (recent co-author and long-time friend of Paulsen) tackles the question of how Mormonism is to be theologically classified, especially in light of the many ways it resists assimilation into traditional Christian theological categories. In the end, while Mosser argues that *Anglo-American finitism* might best describe Mormon thought—if a formal theological classification absolutely must be settled on—he also notes that Mormon thought stands, in a number of profound ways, quite apart from any current theistic classifications. Unlike many others who have struggled to conceptualize Mormonism, or reconcile it to existing and popular theological frameworks, Mosser clearly appreciates the singular nature of the LDS understanding of God and the unique perspective that its truth claims provide.

In “Is Evangelical Mormonism a Viable Concept for the Near Future?” Craig Blomberg suggests that in recent years that the contours of the category “Evangelical” have become sufficiently loosened as to allow for the possibility that much of Mormonism could be appropriated under that title. Blomberg argues that a close reading of the National Association of Evangelicals’ statement of faith reveals that the basic tenets of Mormonism may well meet the doctrinal standards for evangelicalism that

are set there. Blomberg does good service in helping to clear-up a number of common misconceptions that many of his fellow Evangelicals have concerning the nature (and “Christian-ness”) of many Mormon beliefs, showing that in many ways Latter-day Saints and Evangelicals are not nearly as far apart as it is sometimes assumed. However, Blomberg does note that for anything like a full rapprochement to occur there would need to be serious concessions by Latter-day Saints in terms of the ecclesiological language we use and the truth claims we make concerning prophets, priesthood authority, and the salvific necessity of certain ordinances. However, such reconciliation, despite Blomberg’s optimism to the contrary, would seem to strike the death-knell of Mormonism because it requires that we wipe away certain key truth claims that are absolutely essential both to Mormonism’s singularity as a Christian worldview and to its spiritual and intellectual vibrancy as a religious movement. Nonetheless, efforts to initiate respectful, engaging, well-informed dialogue such as Blomberg evidences here are worthy of sincere thanks and thoughtful emulation by both LDS and other Christian thinkers.

In contrasting essays by Stephen Davis and Clark Pinnock, the question of corporeality of God—a fundamental claim of the restored gospel and, as such, a major challenge to traditional Christian theologies, as well as other religious traditions and philosophical thought itself—is examined. Davis engages Paulsen’s pioneering work on divine embodiment directly, carefully detailing a number of important contributions that Paulsen has made over the years to the theological and philosophical literature. Davis, however, responds by outlining (what he takes to be) a biblical case for divine immaterialism, arguing that the text of the Bible offers clear evidence that supports the notion that God is invisible, that He is omnipresent, that He is omnipotent, and, thus, a necessary being who is in no way dependent on the material conditions or physical laws of the universe. Taking the opposite tack, Pinnock argues that if it is doctrinally true that God is able to genuinely engage us as His children, feeling, loving, and suffering-with us in our daily lives, then God must

be embodied in some fashion. While Pinnock does not go so far as to suggest that God's embodiment must necessarily be as it is understood in Mormon thought, he does make a strong case that if God is in fact a person, and that embodiment is an essential feature of personhood, then God must be materially embodied in some fundamental way.<sup>1</sup>

In his essay, "Transascendence: Transcendence in Mormon Thought," James Faulconer examines the meaning of divine transcendence in light of the restored gospel, particularly as it stands in problematic contrast with more traditional notions of how God is taken to exceed the world. LDS thought has traditionally emphasized God's immanence in the world rather than his transcendence of it as an ontologically distinct being (i.e., absolute otherness). Drawing on the philosophical work of the French phenomenologist Emmanuel Levinas and his concept of "transascendence," Faulconer proposes that while defenders of traditional notions of divine transcendence are right in asserting that it is not possible to adequately or comprehensively capture the being of God, they have failed to note that the same holds true of the being of other mortal persons as well. Thus, not only is God transcendent, but so is every other person in the world; in that, our deepest experience of other persons always comes as an interruption and an overflowing of categories, a profound sense of "moral height" in which we find ourselves obligated to them. Faulconer argues that in this irruptive experience of being drawn to another person, to whom we find ourselves indebted and before whom we are called upon to give moral response, we can see "an analogy for thinking about God" that overcomes both the relational problematics of traditional notions of divine transcendence and the reductionist consequences of mere immanence.

While only a small slice of the pie as far as the number of essays contained in this volume, each of these well reflects the overall sophistication, insightfulness, and spiritually (as well as intellectually) uplifting quality of all of the book's entries. As the volume's editor correctly notes in the introduction, even though "the essays here are not strictly written dialogues," they

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.