

James L. Kugel. *The God of Old: Inside the  
Lost World of the Bible.*

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Reviewed by Scott H. Partridge

As we moved into the twenty-first century, the political climate in the United States was enlivened by the announcement that a Mormon was an active candidate for the presidency of the United States. As might be expected, Governor Mitt Romney's religion was a primary topic of editorial comment. Many writers suggested that he faced an uphill battle against those who might agree with his conservative values—which are at times virtually indistinguishable from those of evangelical Christians—but who were less enthusiastic about his religion.

Although Mormons consider themselves Christians, many other Christians disagree. In addition to polygamy, the idea of extrabiblical revelation, Mormons' unorthodox views on human nature and, possibly most important of all, Mormons' non-Trinitarian conceptions of the Godhead are particularly upsetting to other Christians. "If you can't sign on to the Nicene Creed . . . then you're outside the boundaries of traditional Christianity," says Joseph Laconte, a senior fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center.<sup>1</sup>

Certainly Latter-day Saint doctrine regarding the nature of God differs from that of traditional Christians, whether Protestants, Catholics, or Orthodox. The Nicene Creed states, "We believe in one God, the Father Almighty . . . and in one Lord Jesus Christ . . . being of one substance with the Father."<sup>2</sup> From this flows the idea that God is omnipresent and omniscient, that he has no body and exists everywhere simultaneously. In contrast, Mormon doctrine has traditionally held that "the Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man's; the Son also; but the Holy Ghost . . . is a personage of Spirit" (D&C 130:22), and "each occupies space and is and can be in but one place at one time, but each has power and influence that is everywhere present."<sup>3</sup> So Mormons and traditional Christians, and especially Mormons and Evangelicals, have long been at an impasse over

the proper understanding on the nature of God, both sides marshalling proofs, tests, and scholarship to bolster their case.

Additional light on a proper historical understanding of the nature of deity is cast in *The God of Old: Inside the Lost World of the Bible* by James L. Kugel, Starr Professor of Hebrew Literature at Harvard University and Visiting Professor of Bible Studies at Bar-Ilan University in Israel. Kugel, a Jewish scholar, gives insights that should be of interest to both Mormons and traditional Christians. He has authored a number of widely acclaimed books on biblical scholarship, including *The Great Poems of the Bible* (1999) and *The Bible as It Was* (1997). In 2001, he was awarded the prestigious Graweneyer Prize in Religion. In his scholarly activities, he divides his time between Jerusalem and Cambridge, Massachusetts.

In *The God of Old*, Kugel writes that the God of contemporary Judeo-Christianity and Islam—all powerful, all knowing, invisible, and omnipresent, the God that has been a staple of Western thought for centuries—is not the same as the God of most of the Bible, the God who appeared to Abraham, Moses, and other biblical persons. That God was not invisible or abstract. He appeared to people in a world in which the spiritual and the material often overlapped, and Kugel suggests that this way of seeing, far from being a primitive relic of a simpler age, actually reflects a sophisticated but profoundly different understanding of how God interacts with people. As Kugel writes in the introduction:

We like to think that what our religions say nowadays about God is what people have always believed. Even biblical scholars sometimes shy away from the implications of their scholarship when it comes to these basic questions [of how the ancients understood God]. . . . Much of what people believed then would only embarrass us now. . . . On the contrary, the God of Old has something to tell us not only about where our faith came from, but about its most basic reality today. (xii–xiii)

Kugel's field is the study of ancient texts, and he writes that through many years of study he has learned that the ancient

authors, although they are writing . . . for some definite purpose, often end up telling more than they set out to. Especially if a text is of any length or substance, it can open a window onto the inner world of the person who wrote it, revealing something crucial about how that person saw and understood things in general. Such information is often far more valuable than whatever it was the author had consciously set out to write about. The reason is that the author himself, and all the things he thought were obvious or took for granted, are by now long gone. (1)

Kugel's previous books are centered on the Bible's history. In those works, he shows that the stories of Genesis, Exodus, and other books have not,

in times past, been understood to mean what many believe today. In this book he enters the spiritual world of the ancient Israelites to see God through their eyes and on their own terms.

The God of Old was not invisible or an abstraction. He appeared to people—often when not expected or sought out, and sometimes he was not even recognized. Kugel calls this “a moment of confusion” (5) in which an encounter with God is at first mistaken for a meeting with an ordinary person. God was always there, but standing just behind the curtain of ordinary reality.

Among those things that stand in sharp contrast to the writings of later times is the fact that in the ancient scriptures people have to seek God out. In contrast to earlier biblical texts, later and current thinkers insisted that God is everywhere, omnipresent and omniscient. Kugel asks the question, “If so, why is he so hard to find?” (51). The search for God became the central theme of much religious literature, and people did not pray for help so much as for contact. This is illustrated in Psalm 13 when David wrote as follows:

How long wilt thou forget me, O Lord? for ever? how long wilt thou hide thy face from me? How long shall I take counsel in my soul, having sorrow in my heart daily? how long shall mine enemy be exalted over me? Consider and hear me, O Lord my God: lighten mine eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death. (58; Ps. 13:1-3)

Kugel continues in noting that a change occurred as the biblical period went on. God became bigger and more remote. The same God who spoke face to face with Moses became perceived as a huge, cosmic deity—so huge as to surpass our own capacities of apprehension. To quote Isaiah: “Who hath measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, and meted out heaven with the span, and comprehended the dust of the earth in a measure, and weighed the mountains in scales, and the hills in a balance?” (Isa. 40:12). Kugel’s comment on the change was noted in two key paragraphs:

This is the God . . . of later Judaism and Christianity—ungraspably big and far off, who rules the whole world . . . from His great remove in time and space. So much did this become our way of conceiving of God that the “other” God, who speaks to Moses . . . became an embarrassment to later theologians. It is, they said, really the great, universal God that these texts must have meant, the one who is omniscient and omnipresent and utterly unphysical. If they did not describe him as such, well, they meant to—perhaps the Bible was just putting things in terms that were easily grasped by ordinary people.

But this, it seems to me, is not the conclusion suggested by the material examined thus far. Instead, a rather different way of approaching things suggests itself. Perhaps we would do better to think

of the great omnipresent and omniscient God as a kind of model, like the models that scientists use as a way of talking about something that is not otherwise easily imagined or conceptualized. If this is so . . . then perhaps this other God, the theological embarrassment, should invite our renewed attention. He too is a model—or, I would rather say a *report*, a report on the way things look, on the way it happens. (63–64; italics in original)

Even though Kugel stresses words designed to tell us that God is somehow still “out there,” a distinct being in the universe, he still describes him as one who can, in some unexplained way, nevertheless have access to our innermost thoughts. In this regard he quotes Psalm 139:

O Lord, You search me out and know me. You know when I sit around or get up, You understand my thoughts from far off. You sift my comings and goings; You are familiar with all my ways. There is not one thing I say that You, Lord, do not know. In front and in back You press in on me and set Your hand upon me. Even things hidden from myself You know, things that are beyond me. (64; Ps. 139:1–6)

Kugel concludes from this psalm:

Are not the indicated words designed to tell us that God somehow is still “out there,” a distinct being in the universe, but one who can, in some unexplained way, nonetheless have access to our innermost thoughts? It is for the same reason that I would hesitate to say that God is omnipresent in this psalm—if He were everywhere, then there would be no need for Him to understand anyone’s thoughts from far off. He would be right there. (66)

Modern readers, Kugel notes, feel some discomfort at all this. They question the idea that God can appear, for they feel that he has no body or physical substance that can be viewed. Therefore, there is a tendency to disregard scriptural passages that say that he does and to discount numerous passages in which humans see God. To them, these passages cannot mean what they seem to be saying. “Even today’s hard-nosed biblical scholars—bent on studying biblical texts in their original historical context and without theological blinders—sometimes have a tendency to shy away from this God-who-appears” (99).

For example, “Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, and they saw the God of Israel. . . . They beheld God, and they ate and they drank” (Ex. 24:9–11). Kugel continues on to cite numerous passages in which God was seen, noting that within the Holy of Holies there was a specific place above the cherubim-gilded covering of the ark in which God said, “That is where I will meet with you” (Ex. 25:20). He assumes from this that there would be times when God was not above

the ark and was some other place. Kugel also discusses the incident in Exodus 33 in which God appeared to Moses:

Then Moses said: “Show me, I beg, Your glory [physical being].” He said: “All My goodness I can cause to pass before you, and I can proclaim the name ‘the Lord’ before you. But I am compassionate [only] with whom I choose, and merciful [only] with whom I choose.” [Moses remains silent.] He said: “You cannot see My face, for no one can see Me and live.” [Moses still remains silent.] The Lord said, “All right, here is a place next to Me to stand, on this rock. While My glory passes by I will put you in the cleft of the rock and cover you with My hand until I have passed. Then, when I take My hand away, you can see Me from behind, but My face will still not have been seen.” (131; Ex. 33:18–23)

In reference to this incident, Kugel notes that philosophers and theologians from late antiquity through the Middle Ages and beyond have considered that this obvious attribution to God of a physical body was considered a source of scandal, and they ingeniously struggled to somehow read it in nonphysical terms.

For Latter-day Saints, the conclusion reached by Kugel that, according to the ancient scriptures, God was a personage with a body who could only be in one place at one time—but who had the power to know what was happening throughout all of creation—fits in nicely with the restored gospel. When a young Joseph Smith had his First Vision in the Sacred Grove, he wiped the slate clean and learned more about the nature of the Godhead than had been devised in seventeen centuries of reasoning and discussion.

The book itself is beautifully written with an impressive number of sources, and Kugel takes us back to biblical times with his scholarship and clearly and carefully suggests conclusions based on the evidence. His style is straightforward with an occasional wryness that makes it a pleasure to read.

In his concluding chapter entitled “The Last Look,” he makes the following comment in regard to the ancient scriptures to which he makes reference in his book. “These texts seem to be trying to tell us something, something rather sophisticated, about God’s very nature—and that something has little to do with the great, omniscient, and omnipresent deity of later times. To gain some apprehension of their understanding, it is necessary to accept them as . . . an account of God’s nature written down long, long ago” (193).

Kugel adds an endnote from G. Scholem that expresses the modern implication of the development of the Nicene Creed long centuries ago:

The philosophers and theologians [of medieval times] were concerned first and foremost with the *purity* of the concept of God and determined to divest it of all mythical and anthropomorphic elements. But this determination to . . . reinterpret the recklessly anthropomorphic statements of the biblical text and the popular forms of religious expression in terms of a purified theology tended to empty out the concept of God. . . . The price of God's purity is the loss of his living reality. What makes Him a living God . . . is precisely what makes it possible for man to see Him face to face. (105; italics in original)

Joseph Smith would certainly agree with these sentiments, as would contemporary Latter-day Saints. What today's Evangelical critics of Mormonism might make of this interesting confluence of serious scholarship and LDS theology would be interesting to see.

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1. John J. Miller, “Evangelicals for Romney,” *National Review*, December 18, 2006, 40.
2. Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom*, 6th ed., 3 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1996), 1:28–29.
3. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 319.