

M. David Litwa. *Becoming Divine: An Introduction to Deification in Western Culture.*

Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2013.

Reviewed by Daniel C. Peterson

M. David Litwa, who earned his doctorate at the University of Virginia and teaches Greek there, describes his book as attempting to “trace the discourse of deification from ancient Egypt all the way to . . . modern America,” thus offering “a general introduction to the topic of deification, in all its diversity” (ix, x). “From the very first time I heard of it until the present day,” he explains, “I have remained strangely fascinated by the idea of deification and its modern import” (x). His focus is on the “West,” which he defines rather generously (though not unreasonably) as including ancient Egypt, Persia, and Palestine, as well as Greece and Europe (2).

Ordered chronologically, the book’s fifteen chapters range from the deification of the great eighteenth-dynasty Egyptian pharaoh Amenhotep III through the Greco-Roman ruler cults, the Orphic tablets, the “Mithras Liturgy,” and the Hermetic literature, to Friedrich Nietzsche’s atheistic doctrine of human self-deification and the contemporary trans-humanist movement. One chapter treats “Paul and the Gospel of Deification,” a subject that Litwa has discussed at length in his *We Are Being Transformed: Deification in Paul’s Soteriology* (de Gruyter, 2012). Others cover Plotinus, the founder of Neoplatonism, and St. Augustine, as well as the Baghdad Muslim mystic al-Hallaj and the German Dominican thinker Meister Eckhart. The Byzantine theologian St. Gregory Palamas (who wrote of humans as potentially “joint divinities” or “co-gods” with God) and the German Reformer Martin Luther also receive chapter-length examinations.

Obviously, a discussion so wide-ranging and drawing on an impressive array of primary texts risks getting some details wrong. Undeterred, Litwa seems to have done an extraordinarily good job, and he leaves plenty of room for future and deeper examination. He explicitly

acknowledges this: “The project—both for me and for others—is hardly complete. Many more chapters in the history of deification can be written—and will be written, I trust, by a new generation of scholars and theologians who recognize the importance of this topic for our times. . . . If through this book I have done anything to spark interest in the topic of deification and further its research, I rest content” (ix, x). So this is an introductory survey, a collection of summaries. But it’s impressive to see how many varied thinkers have believed in some form of human deification over so long a period of time (roughly the past thirty-five centuries).

There are, of course, multiple concepts of deification, varying widely—and, unsurprisingly, generally correlated very closely with the particular view of God or the gods in question. Some concepts anticipate achieving independent deity, either by human effort or grace or some combination of the two, while others anticipate eventual union with God or teach that we are already one with God and simply need to recognize that fact. “For Plotinus, godhood is attained by moral and physical purification, which he conceives of as the removal of everything alien to us. He uses the image of a sculptor who continually chisels off pieces of marble in order to reveal the lovely face of a cult statue within” (108). Nevertheless, in the manner of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s idea of “family resemblance” (*Familienähnlichkeit*, outlined in the posthumously published 1953 book *Philosophical Investigations*), these widely varying ideas possess overlapping similarities that justify treating them together.

Some commentators have regarded the idea of humans becoming “gods” as the sheerest blasphemy, while others have seen in it the essence of salvation. There can be no dispute, however, about the presence of this doctrine in orthodox Christianity from ancient times. See, for example, these quotations, taken from just one of Litwa’s pages (123): Irenaeus of Lyon (d. AD 202) wrote that Christ “was made what we are to make us what he himself is.” Athanasius of Alexandria (d. AD 373) said that God “was made human so that we might become God.” “God assumed a human being,” said Augustine (d. AD 430), “in order to make human beings gods.” “We have been promised a share in his divinity,” Augustine explained; “The son of God was made a sharer in our mortal nature so that mortals might become sharers in his Godhead.”

For obvious reasons, Latter-day Saint readers will find chapter thirteen, “‘Then Shall They be Gods . . .’: The Mormon Restoration of Deification,” of particular interest. Accurately describing Joseph Smith as “coming out of a Protestant tradition largely tone-deaf to deification” (7),

Litwa does a very creditable job of explaining the Latter-day Saint doctrine of “exaltation,” showing a solid grasp of the relevant materials.

He takes Doctrine and Covenants 76 as the chronological starting point for his historical discussion—a document sometimes overlooked by commentators, who tend to associate the teaching of human exaltation with Nauvoo and, specifically, with the King Follett discourse of twelve years later. “Deification,” he says, “is not a prominent feature of Smith’s early revelations, in particular, the *Book of Mormon*” (197, italics in the original).

But human deification is implied even in the Book of Mormon, which was dictated before the April 1830 organization of the Church: In mathematics, the so-called “transitive property of equality” says that if $a = b$ and $b = c$, then $a = c$. At 3 Nephi 28:10, Christ promises three Nephite disciples that “ye shall be even as I am, and I am even as the Father; and the Father and I are one.” Analogously, if those mortal Nephites will someday be like Christ, and Christ is like the Father, they will someday be like the Father. Though rarely emphasized, this verse, which builds directly on 3 Nephi 12:48 and 19:23, seems nonetheless to contain an unmistakable, culminating promise of deified exaltation.

On page 202, Litwa cites nineteenth-century expressions of what may be the single most radically distinctive idea of Mormonism. “Gods, angels and man are all of the same species,” wrote Parley Pratt. “They comprise a great family which is distributed over the whole solar system in the form of colonies, kingdoms, nations, etc. The great decisive difference between one part of this race and the other consists in the differing degrees of intelligence and purity and also in the difference of the spheres, which each of them inhabit, in a series of progressive Being.” Each human being, said John Taylor, is a “God in embryo” who possesses “in an embryonic state all the faculties and powers of a God. And when he shall be perfected, and have progressed to maturity, he will be like his Father—a God. . . . As the horse, the ox, the sheep, and every living creature, including man, propagates its own species and perpetuates its own kind, so does God perpetuate his.” “To outsiders,” says Litwa,

these teachings can admittedly seem like science fiction. Leaving the bizarre¹ aside, however, one must admit that the Mormon doctrine of deification presents something heartwarming. Deification among

1. Latter-day Saints should not be offended by Litwa’s use of the word *bizarre*: He describes the overall idea of deification itself, to which he’s manifestly drawn, as “ancient and admittedly bizarre” (ix).

the Latter-day Saints is not a matter of the lonely individual buried in contemplation. To become a god, one must become a god *in the midst of family*—as a husband, wife, daughter, son, father, or mother progressing with the family into higher and higher levels of godhood. Mormonism does not so much teach the deification of the individual as the deification of the family and the larger family of the church. Godhood is eternal communion, and the increase of this communion with God and with each other. It is not just the rule and domination of other planets; it is the progression and infinite multiplication of love. (203–4)

This solid, interesting, and readable survey should interest a broad audience of Mormon and other readers.

Daniel C. Peterson received his PhD at the University of California at Los Angeles and is a professor of Islamic studies and Arabic at Brigham Young University. He is the founder of both the university's Middle Eastern Texts Initiative and the independent Interpreter Foundation. He has published and spoken extensively on both Islamic and Mormon subjects. His professional work as an Arabist focuses on the Qur'an and on Islamic philosophical theology.