

Blake T. Ostler. Exploring Mormon Thought.
The Attributes of God.

Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2001

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The Problems of Theism and the Love of God.

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Reviewed by James McLachlan

In the foreword to the book *Mormonism in Dialogue with Contemporary Christian Theologies*,¹ Martin Marty playfully chides the Latter-day Saint contributors to the book who say that Latter-day Saints do not really have a theology and then go on to elaborate on their theology. Of course, there is truth to both sides of the theology question. On one side, Latter-day Saints, like Buddhists, Jews, and Moslems are, as a whole, less concerned with theology than with practice. Because Latter-day Saints do not have formal seminaries, do not train professional theologians, and have a lay priesthood, they tend to not be obsessed with theology. On the other side, Latter-day Saints employ theology whenever they reflect on the meaning of the revelations and doctrine. A minor classic in the field, Sterling M. McMurrin's *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion*,² points to the problem that Latter-day Saints want to avoid in approaching theology, namely, the idea that there are definitive theological foundations to all religious practice. This is just not a very Mormon way of looking at religion. (From a religious studies point of view, it does not really work for any tradition.)

Of course, we can easily imagine numerous theologies that can be spun through reflection on the revelations that make up the Restoration. The problem comes when we mistake our reflections and interpretations for the revelations. This would be like theologizing about my beloved and then falling in love not with her but with my idea of her. This, of course, does not mean that we should not reflect on our faith or our love; we just need to remember what we are doing.

Approached properly, our reflections can illuminate our faith, and recently there has been a swelling of activity in Mormon theology and philosophy. Oxford University Press has published Terryl Givens's *The Viper*

on the Hearth: Mormons, Myths, and the Construction of Heresy (1997) and *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion* (2002).³ The 2005 celebration of Joseph Smith's bicentenary at the Library of Congress included papers examining Smith's impact on religious thought.⁴ In 2003, the conference "God, Humanity, and Revelation: Perspectives from Mormon Philosophy and History" was organized by Kenneth West and held at Yale University, and the Society for Mormon Philosophy and Theology was formed at the meeting. In 2007, Mercer University Press published *Mormonism in Dialogue with Contemporary Christian Theologies*, a collection of essays edited by David L. Paulsen and Donald W. Musser.

One tremendous moment in this rebirth of Mormon philosophical and theological reflection has been the publication of the first two volumes of Blake T. Ostler's *Exploring Mormon Thought*. In line with the LDS lay approach to religion, Ostler is not a professional academic, but a Salt Lake City attorney who studies and writes philosophy at night. In his preface to the first volume, *The Attributes of God*, Ostler explains that the books 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" (1:xi). Both of these volumes are written in the analytic philosophical tradition, and a recently published third volume, *Of God and Gods*,⁵ is written from a theistic existential point of view.

The project aims at two audiences. The Mormon audience would seem obvious, but much of the first 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. Still, there is plenty in both volumes that is accessible to the lay reader. Part of the book's major import is that it serves as an LDS response to some of the recent overtures by evangelical critics of Mormonism. An anthology edited by Francis Beckwith, Carl Mosser, and Paul Owen, *The New Mormon Challenge*,⁶ includes an array of quite competent Anglo-American evangelical philosophers of religion and is an improvement on earlier works critiquing LDS theism, but it is hardly irenic in character. Ostler goes a long way in providing a response to what might be called their "New Evangelical Challenge."

For example, in chapter 3 of volume 2, "The Relations of Moral Obligation and God in LDS Thought," Ostler accomplishes two tasks. He answers some of the critics of Mormon theism as a foundation for ethics (particularly from LDS critic Francis J. Beckwith) and outlines an LDS theory of

ethics based on an LDS conception of God. Critics of Mormon theism have argued that traditional Christian theism can better explain the ground of ethics because it associates God with *being* whereas Mormon theism associates God with *becoming*. The idea here is that a God who is becoming is finite, and, though not responsible for the evils of the world, he cannot provide the unchanging basis that is required for ethics. Ostler thinks that such views are shortsighted with respect to the Mormon view of the relation between ethics and God: “The revelations of the Restoration point to a profound and thoroughly Christian view of ethical obligation that is not available to creedal Christians” (2:78). Many Christians have accepted a divine command theory in which whatever God commands is good. The difficulty with this position is at least two-fold: metaphysically, God could have created a universe like the one described by the original “sadistic” author Marquis de Sade in *120 Days of Sodom*, and the types of torture described would have been good, dependent on the divine will. Practically, the problem is determining what the divine will might be. Self-proclaimed prophets like the Lafferty brothers have claimed murder was commanded by God. Francis J. Beckwith rejects divine command theory and sees the moral law as intrinsic with God’s nature. This idea might be seen as an improvement over command theory, but Ostler argues that Beckwith’s position leads to the view that God must obey the moral law, even if it is ulterior to God, in order for God to achieve divine status; God is not the source of the moral law but subject to it.

In traditional theism, all of God’s commands are good because they are issued by a perfect being, who is the source of all goodness. But, asserts Ostler, if God’s nature is logically prior to God’s will, then God is stuck with whatever his nature happens to dictate, and in this sense, moral values are arbitrary. Given his assumptions about God’s nature, Beckwith’s position says that the moral law cannot be the result of a personal mind, because the moral law is prior to any thought or rational input on God’s part. Ostler argues that “if God is perfectly good by nature rather than by choice, then God is an amoral being” (2:86); God is not morally good, because he is not subject to any moral obligation. If so, then it follows that God is not morally praiseworthy, because God does not have the ability *not* to do good. It also follows that God cannot be tempted.

Ivan Karamazov in Fyodor Dostoevsky’s parable of the Grand Inquisitor claims if Jesus, a God, were not tempted by the three temptations, not only must we ask how we could praise him for something that he did not have to overcome, but we must also ask how he could expect us to resist any such temptation. Ostler does not deny the logical possibility that God could do evil, but he does deny “that the logical possibility of God’s doing

something evil is a reason for failing to trust or have faith in God” (2:87). In addition, he claims that without the ability to do wrong, God cannot be genuinely trusted in the same way we trust our most intimate friends or loved ones. If we were to think that they were faithful merely because they logically and necessarily could not be otherwise, their actions would seem more automatic than personal. If our friend were an immaterial spirit who could not be unfaithful, then our faith in him or her would be based on logical meanings and usage of terms, not on trust.

Ostler then moves to outline an LDS theory of ethics, which begins with Joseph Smith’s teaching that our relationship with God gives us the opportunity to advance in knowledge, and that God has instituted laws that the weakest of us might be exalted with him. Ostler states that the “most natural view . . . grounds moral obligation in the eternal nature of uncreated realities.” Moral laws are thus communal and “define the conditions that are necessary for the growth and progress” of the individual and the community (2:110). Good is whatever leads us to greater love and unity in interpersonal relationships. Personal growth is the increased capacity to love and be loved. Evil is what destroys a relationship—it is alienation.

In chapter 4 of volume 1, “Maximal Divine Power,” Ostler 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” (Alma 42:25). Ostler appeals to B. H. Roberts’s generic idea of God from *The Mormon Doctrine of Deity*,⁷ saying that if “God” is seen as a title, it is at least logically possible that a person called God could cease to be God, “though the person may continue to exist” (1:109). 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” (1:110). In other words, there is not a metaphysical guarantee of God’s goodness, but God has chosen and continues to choose righteousness and noncoercion.

This rich work 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 any educated reader with a systematic attempt to provide a reasoned account of LDS theism. In volume 1, for example, 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 2 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 the summaries of the thought of Joseph Smith, Orson and Parley P. Pratt, John A. Widtsoe, and B. H. Roberts in chapter 3 especially helpful. Ostler also discusses what he labels as Bruce R. McConkie's "neo-absolutist Mormonism" and includes a nice summary comparison of what he calls a "Dynamic Perfection" conception of God, held by Widtsoe and Roberts, and a "Static Perfection" conception, held by Pratt and McConkie (1:99–100). From these three chapters, the concluding two sections of chapter 13, and all of chapter 14—"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 rise to a new level.

Ostler discusses, critiques, and offers Mormon alternatives to various interpretations of the traditional attributes of God. This can be pretty tough reading, but 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 5 in volume 1, "Models of Divine Knowledge," discusses providence and God's foreknowledge. Like process theologians, Ostler takes the position that God is omniscient insofar as God has perfect knowledge of past and present. However, God may know all future possibilities but not which possibilities will be actualized (1:117, 152–53). To think differently is to reduce time to space; instead, the future is open. This discussion continues in volume 1 chapter 6, "The Incompatibility of Free Will and Infallible Foreknowledge," where Ostler considers the consequences of this concept of foreknowledge for both human and divine freedom. "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" (1:146). 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 (1:151).

The final two chapters of volume 1 and chapters 6, 7, and 12 of volume 2 are very important. In "The Problems of Conventional Christology," "A Mormon Christology," "Soteriology in LDS Thought," "The Compassion

Theory of Atonement,” and “God the Eternal Father,” Ostler develops a theory of atonement and Christology that is consistent with the Latter-day Saint belief in freedom and noncoercion. Ostler does an admirable job here, opting for a largely kenotic interpretation of Christ. He rejects all economic transaction theories, which really include all the main theories of atonement provided in the classical tradition. He seeks to base his compassion theory on Matthew 25, 2 Nephi 9, and especially the “mighty change of heart” in Alma 5. The mighty change of heart is becoming like Christ in feeling compassion for the pain of others (2:216–20). True deliverance from sin is not merely escape from penalty but deliverance into active righteousness and fellowship with our Father in Heaven. This is a powerful way of reading the LDS doctrine of atonement, and these chapters are precisely what should spawn the greatest discussion in LDS circles.

Finally, Ostler opposes Roberts’s and Widtsoe’s reading of the King Follet Discourse. His position is similar to that of some of the nineteenth-century Romantics, Cambridge Platonists, and speculative theists who maintained God’s and the Godhead’s uniqueness and difference from human beings while affirming a strong notion of deification. In Ostler’s view, God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are and always will remain divine, and they are different from us in that respect. I do not agree with a good deal of Ostler’s vision here. I especially find his justification for this reading of the King Follet Discourse strained, but this is still a daring proposal that presents a new “Mormon challenge” to those who read the King Follet Discourse and the LDS ideal of deification following Roberts and Widtsoe.

I hope that Ostler’s work finds a wide audience within the Church. 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 these volumes when I want to think about Mormon views on key theological issues. Even when I disagree with Ostler’s explanations of LDS doctrine, I have never read them discussed with such theological subtlety and depth.

James McLachlan (jmclachla@email.wcu.edu) is Professor of Philosophy and Religion at Western Carolina University. He received his PhD in religious studies from the University of Toronto and his MA in European history from Indiana University. His many publications include “Fragments for a Process Theology of Mormonism,” in *Element: The Journal of Mormon Philosophy* 2, no. 3 (2006); and the forthcoming “Mormon Eschatology and Process Eschatology: A Reply to David Paulsen” in the journal *Process Studies*.

1. David L. Paulsen and Donald W. Musser, eds., *Mormonism in Dialogue with Contemporary Christian Theologies* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 2007).
2. Sterling M. McMurrin, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1965).
3. Terryl Givens, *The Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myths, and the Construction of Heresy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).
4. John W. Welch, ed., *The Worlds of Joseph Smith: A Bicentennial Conference at the Library of Congress* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2006). Available at byustudies.byu.edu.
5. Blake T. Ostler, *Of God and Gods, Exploring Mormon Thought* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2008).
6. 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, Mich: Zondervan, 2002).
7. B. H. Roberts, *The Mormon Doctrine of Deity: The Roberts-Wan Der Donckt Discussion, to Which Is Added a Discourse, Jesus Christ, the Revelation of God: Also a Collection of Authoritative Mormon Utterances on the Being and Nature of God* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1903).