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How Deep the Platonism? A Review of Owen and Mosser's Appendix: Hellenism, Greek Philosophy, and the Creedal "Straightjacket" of Christian Orthodoxy

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Abstract Cook addresses the following issues raised by Owen and Mosser: Did Greek philosophy cause an apostasy in the early Christian church? How deeply Hellenized were the early Jewish converts of Christianity? Philosophy and the Hellenization of Christianity, and Early Judaic and Christian beliefs concerning God and theosis.

How Deep the Platonism? A Review of Owen and Mosser's Appendix: Hellenism, Greek Philosophy, and the Creedal "Straightjacket" of Christian Orthodoxy

Reviewed by Roger D. Cook

In the appendix of their review on *How Wide the Divide?* Owen and Mosser continue an erudite and insightful comparison of Latter-day Saint (hereafter referred to as LDS) and evangelical Christian beliefs. Both Owen and Mosser's review (hereafter cited as O&M) and Blomberg and Robinson's work in *How Wide the Divide?* (hereafter cited as HWD) are truly groundbreaking, and we owe a debt of gratitude to Blomberg and Robinson for taking the initial steps toward dialogue. The subject matter of the appendix is wide-ranging, from how much Greek influence is seen in the early Christian church to the intricacies of the doctrine of the Trinity. This review will briefly address the following issues:

1. Did Greek philosophy cause an apostasy in the early Christian church?
2. How deeply Hellenized were the early Jewish converts of Christianity?
3. Philosophy and the Hellenization of Christianity.
4. Early Judaic and Christian beliefs concerning God and theosis.

It will also be shown that Middle Platonic and Neoplatonic Greek philosophy had extensive influence on the development of the orthodox Christian understanding of God, but that orthodox doctrine is not entirely a product of Hellenization as Robinson seems to suggest.

Did Greek Philosophy Cause an Apostasy in the Early Christian Church?

According to LDS theology, many segments of early Christianity during its formative years quickly became corrupt, with

individuals and entire congregations falling into apostasy. As this apostasy became widespread, priesthood authority and inspired revelation were withdrawn from the church.[1] Greek philosophy is sometimes credited as being the primary cause of the departure of the church from the pristine teachings of Christ and the apostles recorded in the New Testament. Robinson, for example, claims that the Trinitarian God is the result of the spread of Greek philosophy into Christianity; even going as far as saying that the orthodox God is identical to the God of Greek philosophy.[2]

It should be recognized that, from an LDS perspective, the apostasy is the result of multiple influences, not just Greek philosophy. Persecution, immorality, and multiple pagan influences, including Greek philosophy, all contributed to it.[3] Another factor that should be considered is that not all Christians embraced licentious lifestyles, meaning that at least some Christian congregations entered the second century with fairly intact moral centers. This is evidenced by John's reference to the faithful Christians

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1 See James E. Talmage, *A Study of the Articles of Faith*, 12th ed., rev. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1977), 303, 492.

2 See Craig L. Blomberg and Stephen E. Robinson, *How Wide the Divide? A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1997), 92; compare 59–60, 69, 79, 83, 86, 88–89. Robinson's position can be summed up in a passage from his book *Are Mormons Christians?* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1991), 38: "The Latter-day Saints believe, and modern scholarship agrees, that the theology of the councils and creeds represents a radical change from the theology of the New Testament Church. The Latter-day Saints see this change between the first and fourth centuries as part of a great apostasy; scholars refer to it as the Hellenization of Christianity, meaning the modification of the Christian message into forms that would be acceptable in the gentile Greek cultural world. But in that process of modification and adaptation, Christian teaching became Greek teaching, and Christian theology became Greek philosophy. In the LDS view the admixture of Greek elements with the original message of the gospel did not improve it but diluted it. The resulting historical church was still generically Christian, but was no longer the pure, true Church of the New Testament period."

3 Pagan influences such as Greek folk religion, the cult of the heroes, and the punishments of Hades also had much influence on orthodox Christianity. See Martin P. Nilsson, *Greek Folk Religion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984), 18–20, 118–20; Robin L. Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 111–35, 445–50; Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 5–6.

living in Smyrna, Thyatira, and Philadelphia (see Revelation 2:8–11, 18–24, 3:7–10), and by Clement's mention of the faithful congregation in Rome in his (First) Epistle to the Corinthians.[4] Greek philosophy, if it is to be taken as one of the causes of the apostasy, should be seen as the final blow to a Christianity reeling from attacks and persecutions from without and destructive apostasy and schisms from within. It was a major factor in the elimination of many pure and unsullied doctrines in early Christianity. Greek philosophy drew Christians—who had survived cultural deviations, internal divisions, and immorality—from the pristine doctrines of the early church. It is unclear how long this final phase would have taken, but it is clear that Greek philosophy had made major inroads into Christian thought by the middle of the second century.

Blomberg questions the entire LDS position regarding the apostasy. He notes that LDS theology often avoids many of the theological dilemmas faced by modern Christians and wonders why the ancients, if they had the same beliefs as the Latter-day Saints, would "ever have exchanged such a neat and orderly system for one that leaves the unanswered questions that remain in the Bible and early Christianity?" (HWD, 108). To understand why Christians would have left the simple and persuasive doctrines of the early church, one must understand the near seductive nature of philosophy and, more specifically, why the mysticism and logical appeal of Greek Middle Platonism captured the minds and imaginations of the intelligentsia of the Roman world.

Greek philosophy was seen as the "rocket science" of the ancient world, able to answer sophisticated questions on subjects ranging from ethics to the nature of the universe. A number of Greek philosophical schools existed in the Roman Empire at the time of Christ, including Aristotelian, Stoic, and the most

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4 Clement, an early bishop of Rome, encouraged the Saints in Corinth (ca. 95) to cast "away from us all unrighteousness and iniquity, along with all covetousness, strife, evil practices, deceit, whispering, and evil-speaking, all hatred of God, pride and haughtiness, vainglory and ambition." Clement, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 35, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (hereafter *ANF*), ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1951), 1:14. The Roman congregation seems alive and well, with its moral leadership intact.

influential, Middle Platonic.[5] The appeal of philosophy was widespread, with numbers of educated citizens declaring themselves aligned with one or another of the popular philosophies. Such cities as Athens, Alexandria, Antioch, and Tarsus developed deep philosophical traditions; debates between the different schools of thought became the popular pastime among the educated elite. In fact, philosophy actually became part of regular education in the Roman Empire; sophisticated ideas of the Greek philosophers trickled into the consciousness of cultured citizens throughout the empire. Philosophy gave direction on how to rightly live one's life in the often difficult environment of the empire, methods by which one might reach or dimly comprehend infinite reality, and a hope for a better life for the soul in the transcendent world to come.[6]

In the second century, as the church began to attract members from among the educated elite of the Roman Empire, philosophy retained its premier position. For example, the early church father Clement regarded philosophy as indispensable to understanding Christian theology and even developed his own Christian brand of Middle Platonism[7] in the Hellenized Egyptian city of Alexandria. Clement writes:

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5 John Dillon points out that each of the major philosophical schools had a great effect on the other. This means that Middle Platonism had important Aristotelian, Stoic, and Pythagorean elements built in and that the other major philosophies would have borrowed extensively from the other schools as well. See John Dillon, *The Middle Platonists: 80 B.C. to A.D. 220* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977), 12–18, 43–51, 52–62.

6 See Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy* (Garden City, N.Y.: Image Books, 1985), 379–84, 451–56; Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind: Understanding the Ideas That Have Shaped Our World View* (New York: Ballantine, 1991), 77–78, 87–88, 151–52.

7 Robert Berchman writes: "Clement carries into early Christian Platonism a philosophical interpretation first articulated in the Judaic Platonism of Philo. Furthermore, he hammers out a metaphysical system that becomes paradigmatic for later Christian Middle Platonism in the Empire. . . . Finally he institutionalizes the norms of Jewish Middle Platonism, as represented in Philo, and sets them up as Christian Middle Platonism's own. . . . As the first articulator of a systematic Christian philosophy based upon Platonic principles, Clement establishes Christian Platonism as another philosophical option among the variety of school Platonisms." Berchman, *From Philo to Origen: Middle Platonism in Transition* (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1984), 56.

> Accordingly, before the advent of the Lord, philosophy was necessary to the Greeks for righteousness. And now it becomes conducive to piety; being a kind of preparatory training to those who attain to faith through demonstration. "For thy foot," it is said, "will not stumble, if thou refer what is good, whether belonging to the Greeks or to us, to Providence." For God is the cause of all good things; but of some primarily, as of the Old and the New Testament; and of others by consequence, as philosophy. Perchance, too, philosophy was given to the Greeks directly and primarily, till the Lord should call the Greeks. For this was a schoolmaster to bring "the Hellenic mind," as the law, the Hebrews, "to Christ." Philosophy, therefore, was a preparation, paving the way for him who is perfected in Christ.[8]

In like manner the fifth-century church father Augustine declares Plato's philosophy to be the most pure and clear,[9] and the first Christian apologist Justin Martyr contends that the Greek philosophers "spoke well in proportion to the share he had of the spermatic word" and "whatever things were rightly said among all men, are the property of us Christians."[10] With this universal admiration it is no wonder that Christians quickly succumbed to the metaphysical speculations of Greek philosophy.[11]

How Deeply Hellenized Were the Early Jewish Converts of Christianity?

In response to Robinson's claim that the Hellenistic mind-set shaped orthodox conceptions of God,[12] Owen and Mosser argue

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8 Clement, *Stromata* 1.5, in *ANF*, 2:305.

9 See Augustine, *Contra Academicos* 3.41.

10 Justin Martyr, *Apology* 2.13, *ANF*, 1:193.

11 A. H. Armstrong suggests that the church fathers used philosophy to explore and understand their own doctrine and to make these beliefs attractive to the Greek and Roman educated elite. A. H. Armstrong, *An Introduction to Ancient Philosophy*, 3rd ed. (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman & Allanheld, 1983), 157–58; compare 141–56.

12 See note 2.

that extensive Hellenization had already taken place in even the most orthodox Judaism of Christ's time (see O&M, 85). It is clear that there is much Hellenistic influence in Judaism at the time of Christ. Paul, for example, was a Jew of the Diaspora turned Christian (see Acts 9:1–25). He was from the Greek community of Tarsus, a major center of Stoic thought, on the southern coast of Asia. Minor and hundreds of miles from Jerusalem (see Acts 9:11) and as such would have been familiar with the Hellenized culture of the empire. Whereas Christ spent his entire ministry within the predominantly Jewish confines of Palestine, Paul spent the vast majority of his life in the Hellenistic world, using Greek as his primary mode of communication. The coins in Paul's purse would have had Greek writing and the emperors of Rome inscribed on them. The market squares that he frequented would have been filled with the sights and sounds of Greek culture. Paul simply could not have been a citizen of the Roman Empire without having *some* Hellenism rub off on him.

In fact, it must be admitted that some distinct similarities exist between the beliefs and practices of the Hellenistic world and Paul. Paul shows some familiarity with Hellenistic philosophy as he quotes a passage from *Phaenomena*, a poem by the Stoic philosopher Aratus, at the Areopagus in Athens (see Acts 17:28; see also 17:16–34). There is also some evidence that Paul may have used Stoic ethics to help define Christian values, as is seen in his Epistle to the Philippians.[13] Paul even uses allegory, a well-known Greek (and more particularly Stoic) philosophical device used to find hidden nonliteral interpretations of ancient texts (see Galatians 4:21–31). Each of these examples shows that Paul is familiar with Greek philosophy, especially Stoicism. However, it is difficult to show that Paul has anything but a *passing familiarity with Greek culture and philosophy.*

Several scholars point out that Paul essentially remained an outsider to the Hellenistic world, firmly connected to his Judeo-Christian heritage. Robin Fox, who explains the Roman world from both pagan and Christian perspectives, writes:

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13 Troels Engberg-Pedersen, "Stoicism in Philippians," in *Paul in His Hellenistic Context,* ed. Troels Engberg-Pedersen (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 256–90.

> In Paul's letters, we are reading an author who is capable of alluding at second hand to themes of the pagan schools but who remains essentially an outsider with no grasp of their literary style or content: Paul's echoes of pagan philosophy derive at best from the culture of other Greek-speaking Jews, but not from a pagan or philosophic education.[14]

Paul, then, would have come from a *mildly* Hellenized Judaism when compared to other *radically* Hellenized Jews living in the empire. David T. Runia, for example, suggests that the parallels between the terminology of Philo, a radically Hellenized Jew from Alexandria, and Paul are only incidental and that their belief systems cannot be reconciled.[15] Runia also states that Paul's use of allegory in Galatians 4:21–31 varies from Philo in that Paul "is not philosophically motivated. He does not try to exploit difficulties in understanding the literal text of scripture as Philo does."[16] Henry Chadwick writes that upon close examination the differences between Paul and Stoicism "come to look more substantial than the likenesses."[17] Charlesworth points out that in the six major areas in which Paul was previously believed to be influenced by Greek thought, five are now known to be thoroughly Judaic in origin, and the sixth is purely a Christian development.[18]

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14 Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, 305; compare Tarnas, *Passion of the Western Mind*, 151–54.

15 See David T. Runia, *Compendia Rerum Judaicarum ad Novum Testamentum: Philo in Early Christian Literature* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 66–74.

16 Ibid., 86. Runia shows that there are more Greek/Christian parallels in the book of Hebrews, with some clear dependence on the "linguistic, hermeneutical, and thematic correspondences" of Hellenized Alexandrian philosophy, but again the distinction is made that "the thought worlds are different" (78; see 74–78). The Gospel of John is also examined, with interesting parallels drawn, but with the result that "if Philo had never existed, the Fourth Gospel would most probably not have been any different than what it is" (83; see 78–83).

17 Henry Chadwick, "The Beginning of Christian Philosophy: Justin: The Gnostics," in *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy*, ed. A. H. Armstrong (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 158.

18 The six areas follow: (1) All humans are sinful. (2) Man cannot earn forgiveness by himself. (3) Those who attempt to perfectly keep the law are

Contrary to Owen and Mosser's representation, contemporary scholarship seems to deny vast amounts of Hellenistic influence in the development of either early Judaic or early Christian doctrine.[19] The preponderance of evidence shows that the Hellenization of Christian doctrine is relatively minor until the second century.[20]

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doomed to failure. (4) Salvation is by grace through faith. (5) The belief in a Judaic type of predestination. (6) The belief that one makes personal commitments to Christ through the resurrection and atonement. See James H. Charlesworth, foreword to *Paul and the Dead Sea Scrolls,* ed. J. Murphy O'Connor and James H. Charlesworth (New York: Crossroad, 1990), ix–xvi.

19 Owen and Mosser cite Martin Hengel to show the extensive Hellenization of Judaism at the time of Christ (61 nn. 179, 181). The emphasis of Hengel's work, however, is that there is no such thing as a non-Hellenized Judaism, not that all Judaism has been equally Hellenized, nor that all Jews have achieved a radical level of Hellenization. He is cautious about making a distinction between a "Palestinian Judaism" and a "Hellenistic Diaspora," appropriately recognizing that all Jews have achieved *some* level of Hellenization. Hengel emphasizes that it is just as dangerous to overuse the term *Hellenization* when referring to first-century Christianity since the factors that determine the extent of Hellenization are very complex. Hengel also explains that the Judaism of the time of Christ is quite complex and able to develop internally much of its own doctrine without Hellenistic influence. Martin Hengel, *The "Hellenization" of Judaea in the First Century after Christ* (Philadelphia: Trinity, 1989), 28, 53–56. Scholarship now generally emphasizes the basic Jewish character of Christianity. In addition to the works already cited in this paper, the following list shows other scholars who tout Christianity's Jewish roots: Brad H. Young, *Jesus the Jewish Theologian* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1995); James H. Charlesworth, ed., *Jesus' Jewishness: Exploring the Place of Jesus within Early Judaism* (New York: Crossroad, 1991); Adela Y. Collins, *Cosmology and Eschatology in Jewish and Christian Apocalypticism* (New York: Brill, 1996); Martha Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* (New York: Oxford, 1993); James D. Tabor, *Things Unutterable, Paul's Ascent to Paradise in Its Greco-Roman, Judaic, and Early Christian Contexts* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1986).

20 Even Owen and Mosser's claim that the Sadducees of Jesus' time were radically Hellenized (O&M, 63) is doubtful. Theirs is better explained as a conservative Jewish stance. The Sadducees only believed in the written Law, where the resurrection is not definitively demonstrated (unlike other passages of the Old and New Testaments, where it is clearly described). I am indebted to Daniel Graham of the BYU Philosophy Department for this suggestion. Owen and Mosser also need to show how Philo the Jew can believe in angels (*De Somniis* 1.3 and 1.238; *De Gigantibus* 6 and 16) while the Sadducees who are allegedly also "*radically* Hellenized" (O&M, 86) reject the belief. In general it should be

It seems, in fact, that Paul's ministry impugns many of the beliefs and practices of the Hellenistic world itself. It should be remembered that before his conversion Paul was a Pharisee (see Acts 26:5), a member of a Jewish sect famous for avoiding all things gentile.[21] Pharisees adhered to a strict moral code and strict observance of the written and oral laws of Moses. It should come as no surprise, then, that Paul rejects the wisdom and culture of the Hellenistic world as he challenges Greek philosophy and religion on their own turf in Athens (see Acts 17:16–34). Paul declares Christianity to be in opposition to the polytheistic religions and ethereal philosophies of Rome and Greece. He never compromises with the idolatry of the empire, even as he finds himself in disfavor by causing a drop in the idolatrous trade devoted to the goddess Diana (see Acts 19:23–41). Paul also warns the Colossian Saints against the use of philosophy (*philosophias;* see Colossians 2:8) and shows even more contempt for Greek philosophy as he writes to the Corinthians:

> For after that in the wisdom *[sophia]* of God the world by wisdom *[sophia]* knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe. For the Jews require a sign, and the *Greeks seek after wisdom [sophia]:* But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and *unto the Greeks foolishness.* (1 Corinthians 1:21–23, emphasis added)

This much is clear: Paul simply doesn't closely associate himself with things Greek—especially the wisdom claimed by Greek philosophy! Paul's Hellenism is trivial when compared to radically Hellenized Jews living in other areas of the Roman Empire. Far from being a Christian dependent upon Hellenism for identification and direction, Paul seems to be the ideal Christian: in the Hellenized world of the Roman Empire, but not of it! This is not a claim that a Hellenization never took place in the early Judaism

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noted that most Jews and Christians generally avoided pagan Greeks and Romans unless they were potential converts, with the noted exception of such Hellenized Jews as found in Alexandria. There was mutual distrust and suspicion, and both kept to their own side of the street.

21 See John Riches, *Jesus and the Transformation of Judaism* (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 1980), 134.

from which Christianity sprang, but an attempt to put it in its proper perspective. Jews and Christians had their lives and religion colored by Hellenistic civilization, but the evidence seems to suggest that the impact of Hellenism on the doctrine of the earliest Christians was minimal at best.

Philosophy and the Hellenization of Christianity

A radical Hellenization of Christianity began in the middle of the second century, but it should not be understood that with the introduction of Middle Platonic philosophy, Christians did not retain many of their distinct theological roots. Much of early Christianity was redefined to fit a Middle Platonic mold, but not every aspect of Greek philosophy was compatible with Christianity and as a result some facets of it would have been summarily rejected. For example, Orthodox Christianity could never fully accept the Greek idea that matter was evil and accordingly remained firmly committed to the idea of Christ's and man's resurrection. Christians, therefore, continued to believe in a literal resurrection of the body, despite the lingering belief in Middle Platonism and Neoplatonism that one's duty was to escape from the corrupting influences of the body and exist as an immaterial soul in a quasi-divinized state for eternity.[22] Orthodox Christians also continued to believe that God is deeply concerned with mankind, unlike various philosophic schools that emphasized that mankind is beneath God's notice.[23] If we fail to recognize strong Christian

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22 Plato taught that "we should make all speed to take flight from this world to the other, and that means becoming like the divine so far as we can, and that again is to become righteous with the help of wisdom. . . . nothing is more like the divine than any one of us who becomes as righteous as possible" (*Theaetetus* 176b–c; see 176e). Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, eds., *The Collected Dialogues of Plato, Including the Letters* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 881. This Platonic belief that one can become divine is unrelated to early Judeo-Christian notions that one is to become divine by entering God's presence and having one's body divinely transformed. See pages 287–98 below.

23 Owen and Mosser point out that even during the time of the church fathers some Middle Platonic and Neoplatonic "positions" were never accepted, such as the extreme transcendence of Aristotle's Prime Mover and the Christian acceptance of *ex nihilo* creation in opposition to the premortal existence of materials stressed by Greek philosophy (O&M, 70).

elements that remain firmly entrenched in orthodox thought, we fail to understand the development of orthodox Christianity. The Hellenization of Christianity is extensive, but by no means complete. The Christian fathers found, on the other hand, that many aspects of Middle Platonic philosophy were fully compatible with Christian thought, and they quickly and thoroughly applied them to Christianity.

By the middle of the second century, a body of Christian apologists began unashamedly to apply Greek metaphysical speculation and allegorical interpretation to Christian doctrine. Church fathers such as Justin Martyr, Tatian, Theophilus, Tertullian, Clement, and Origen accepted the supremacy and basic tenets of Middle Platonic Greek philosophy. It is extremely important, however, to note that the *greatest and most influential intrusion of Greek philosophy occurred with the very earliest apologists; men who radically redefined the Judeo-Christian Godhead in Middle Platonic terms.* Any further influence of Middle Platonism and Neoplatonism should be seen as secondary in importance, for all further imports of Platonic thought were adjustments to the basic synthesis of Christian and Greek thought developed by the earliest Hellenized Christians.

Plutarch, famous for both his literary work entitled *Lives* and his Middle Platonic philosophy, is an excellent representative of Hellenistic thought at the very time it began to be embraced by Christianity. Middle Platonic thought such as Plutarch's became a catalyst for change in second-century Christianity. Plutarch accepts a God who alone has existence within himself. God is understood to be without limits—an immaterial essence out of time and space. Plutarch's God is immaterial, transcendent, and absolute:

> And we again, answering the God, say to him, *EI, thou art;* attributing to him the true, unfeigned, and sole appellation of being. . . . What then is it that has really a being? That which is eternal, unbegotten and incorruptible, to which no time brings a change. For time is a certain movable thing appearing in connection with fleeting matter, always flowing and unstable, like a leaky vessel full of corruption and generation; of which the sayings "after" and "before," "it has been" and "it shall be," are of themselves a confession that it has

> no being. For to say that what not yet is or what has already ceased to be is in being, how foolish and absurd is it. . . . Now if the same thing befalls Nature, which is measured by time, as does the time which measures it, there is nothing in it permanent or subsistent, but all things are either breeding or dying, according to their commixture with time. . . . But God, we must say, *is,* and he is not in any time, but in eternity, which is immovable without time, and free from inclination, in which there is nothing first, or last, or newer; but being one, it has filled its eternal duration with one only "now"; and that only *is* which is really according to this, of which it cannot be said, that it either was or shall be, or that it begins or shall end. Thus ought those who worship to salute and invocate this Eternal Being, or else indeed, as some of the ancients have done, with this expression, . . . *Thou art one.*[24]

Plutarch's God is pure existence and impersonal essence, having no dependence on the universe. The philosophy of Plutarch and other Middle Platonic philosophers was borrowed by Christian philosophers in the second century, the result being a radical redefinition of the early Christian concept of God.[25]

One of the earliest beliefs rejected by philosophy—and inevitably by orthodox Christian thought as well—was that God has a glorified material and anthropomorphic body. Pre-Socratic philosophers jettisoned notions of crude humanlike gods made out of mundane matter as they found the idea to be incompatible with a philosophy that sought to give stability to the universe. It was difficult for philosophers such as Xenophanes, Heraclitus, and Parmenides to understand how the humanlike gods of Homer and Hesiod, who were thought to be more interested in political intrigue, petty bickering, civil war, and promiscuous activities, could

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24 R. Kippox, "Of the Word *EI* Engraven over the Gate of Apollo's Temple at Delphi," 17–20, in *Plutarch's Essays and Miscellanies*, Plutarch's Lives and Writings, vol. 4, ed. A. H. Clough and William Goodwin (New York: Colonial, 1905), 493–95.

25 See J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 5th ed., rev. (London: Black, 1977), 83–136.

sustain the physical universe, let alone be the foundation of it.[26] At first philosophical speculation replaced the gods with one of the common elements thought to be found in the universe, such as fire, air, or ether. They theorized that one of these elements ruled the universe as an eternal intelligent material element,[27] but eventually Plato rejected the idea that any reality based on material element could be the basis for what is truly real.

Plato taught that there are two spheres of reality: a higher one based on rational thought and the mundane one we find ourselves in. Plato believed that the higher level of existence is a quasi-mathematical realm entirely composed of thought. It is a place of changeless absolute ideas, called forms, which impart some reality to the changing world we experience. This mysterious higher sphere is by its very nature above the comprehension of mere humans who are addicted to the body in the changing world of mortality. Plato believed that as men turn from and ignore the body, using the mind to contemplate disciplines such as mathematics and philosophy, they could begin to get a meager—but still distorted—glimpse of the absolute perfection to be found in the

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26 One of the earliest questions pre-Socratic Greek philosophy dealt with was the nature of the universe. Philosophers tried to explain how the universe operated and sought for the foundational element of the universe. Heraclitus, for example, noted that the universe was in continual flux, with all objects in a constant state of change, including a breaking down and passing away of things. Parmenides correctly recognized that this could lead to the paradox of the universe going out of existence. It was reasoned that if everything in the universe undergoes change and decay, then eventually nothing at all should exist, as everything would be slipping towards its own apparent extinction! To explain what gives the universe stability, Parmenides began a search for a mysterious element upon which the universe would be based. But this foundational "stuff" could not itself be subject to change, as change suggested weakness and dissolubility. His original search for the ultimate substance—the thing upon which the existence of the universe hinged—eventually led later philosophers to develop unique abstract theories of God that differed radically from what had been accepted in Greek culture. As these Greek absolutistic concepts were adopted by Christians beginning in the second century, they would entirely redefine how classical Christianity understood God. Reginald E. Allen, *Greek Philosophy: Thales to Aristotle, Readings in the History of Philosophy* (New York: Free Press, 1966), 1–35; Armstrong, *Introduction*, 9–20; Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 14–20.

27 See Allen, *Greek Philosophy*, 1–35; Armstrong, *Introduction*, 33–52.

ethereal realm.[28] This concept of an ultimate and absolute reality, which is outside of human experience and comprehension, became the standard definition of God in Greek philosophy and remains the accepted belief of orthodox Christianity today.[29]

This rejection of anthropomorphism and materiality is seen in the early Christian fathers, who replaced their own tradition of God as a celestial man, clothed with a perfect material body, with Greek philosophical notions. A good example of the rejection of anthropomorphism and materiality in Christian thought is found in Clement. Using the pre-Socratic Greek philosopher Xenophanes as his authority, Clement rejects any concept of an embodied God:

> Rightly, then, Xenophanes of Colophon, teaching that God is one and incorporeal, adds: —
>
> "One God there is 'midst gods and men supreme;
> In form, in mind, unlike to mortal men."
>
> And again: —
>
> "But men have the idea that gods are born,
> And wear their clothes, and have both voice and shape."
>
> And again: —"But had the oxen or the lions hands,
>
> Or could with hands depict a work like men,
> Were beasts to draw the semblance of the gods,
> The horses would them like to horses sketch,
> To oxen, oxen, and their bodies make
> Of such a shape as to themselves belongs."[30]

This rejection, first made popular by Xenophanes, had become the standard Greek position on anthropomorphism, suggesting that it is arrogant for men to cast God in their own

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28 See Armstrong, *Introduction*, 33–52; Dillon, *The Middle Platonists*, 1–10; Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 14–20.

29 Blomberg appropriately shows that there have been recent efforts in evangelical scholarship that tend to reject some of the extreme positions of orthodox Christianity (see HWD, 103, 109).

30 Clement, *Stromata* 5.14, in *ANF*, 2:470.

likeness. As a good Middle Platonist, Clement fully accepts this argument and uses Xenophanes' philosophy to reject all anthropomorphisms in the Bible.

Clement further applies this philosophical standard, declaring that the notion of a material God is a folly of men whose minds are befuddled by their own material nature. He writes that God is unlike humanity in that he does not have the characteristics immediately associated with mortal men:

> But the *most of men,* clothed with what is perishable, like cockles, and rolled all round in a ball in their excesses, like hedgehogs, *entertain the same ideas of the blessed and incorruptible God as of themselves.* But it has escaped their notice, though they be near us, that God has bestowed on us ten thousand things in which He does not share: birth, being Himself unborn; food, He wanting nothing; and growth, He being always equal; and long life and immortality, He being immortal and incapable of growing old.[31]

Clement's first claim is that only those fully engaged in the material world would entertain absurd notions of an embodied God, but this seems to be little more than a non sequitur on his part. By Clement's own admission the majority of people living during his time entertain exactly this belief! This majority would include Christians who did not accept Greek philosophy as the standard by which God is to be defined, and are not offended by an early Judeo-Christian tradition of God being a glorified man. Indeed it is to such ignorant people, including Christians uninitiated in Greek philosophical argumentation, that Clement's writings are directed.

Clement's second claim, that God is beyond the needs immediately associated with man, is identical with early Judeo-Christian belief. Christians and Jews believed God to be above most of the limitations and worries experienced by man, agreeing that God doesn't need to eat, doesn't experience physical growth, and will never die. But Clement continues his argument by saying that we

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31 Clement, *Stromata* 5.11, in *ANF,* 2:460, emphasis added.

should likewise disassociate God from other anthropomorphisms attributed to him:

> Wherefore *let no one imagine that hands, and feet, and mouth, and eyes,* and *going in and coming out,* and *resentments and threats,* are said by the Hebrews to be *attributes of God.* By no means; but that certain of these appellations are used more sacredly in an *allegorical sense,* which, as the discourse proceeds, we shall explain at the proper time.[32]

Thus Clement seeks to explain away the blatant anthropomorphisms of the Bible by the use of Greek allegorical interpretation. The literal interpretations of scripture, in good Middle Platonic fashion, are replaced with supposedly deeper insights.[33]

Clement next explains that the true meaning behind the allegory is that God is completely transcendent, encompassing all things within the universe. As in Middle Platonism, God is infinite, unknowable, incomprehensible, absolute, wholly simple, the Cause of all things:

> And John the apostle says: "No man hath seen God at any time. The only-begotten God, who is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared Him,"—calling invisibility and ineffableness[34] the bosom of God. Hence some have called it the Depth, as containing and embosoming all things, inaccessible and boundless.[35]
>
> This discourse respecting God is most difficult to handle. For since the first principle of everything is

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32 Ibid., emphasis added.

33 See Henry Bettenson, ed. and trans., *The Early Christian Fathers: A Selection from the Writings of the Fathers from St. Clement at Rome to St. Athanasius* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 21; see also Armstrong, *Introduction*, 160, 172.

34 Dillon, *The Middle Platonists,* 155, suggests that the inability to describe God, or ineffableness, was an Alexandrian Middle Platonic development that first appears in Philo.

35 Middle Platonists would believe that God is inaccessible and boundless because "it" is beyond the physical confines of our own universe. Plato distinguished between the world of Being where God exists and our world of becoming, which is one of location and change. Plato, *Republic* 5.479–80; 7.514–17.

> difficult to find out, the absolutely first and oldest principle, which is the cause of all other things being and having been, is difficult to exhibit.[36] For how can that be expressed which is neither genus, nor difference, nor species, nor individual, nor number; nay more, is neither an event, nor that to which an event happens? No one can rightly express Him wholly. For on account of His greatness He is ranked as the All, and is the Father of the universe. Nor are any parts to be predicated of Him.[37] For the One is indivisible; wherefore also it is infinite, not considered with reference to inscrutability, but with reference to its being without dimensions, and not having a limit. And therefore it is without form and name. And if we name it, we do not do so properly, terming it either the One, or the Good, or Mind,[38] or Absolute Being, or Father, or God, or Creator, or Lord. We speak not as supplying His name; but for want, we use good names, in order that the mind may have these as points of support, so as not to err in other respects. For each one by itself does not express God; but all together are indicative of the power of the Omnipotent. For predicates are expressed either from what belongs to things themselves, or from their mutual relation. But none of these are admissible in reference to God. Nor any more is He apprehended by the science of demonstration. For it depends on primary and better known principles. But there is nothing antecedent to the Unbegotten.[39]

For Clement, the standards of Middle Platonism thus define God. God is the single source of reality, existing outside of our

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36 Aristotle called his God the Final Cause. It was a static being that experienced absolutely no change, including motion. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1072b–1073a, 1074b–1075a.

37 Middle Platonists would stress that God cannot have any parts or he would be found in time and space.

38 The titles of One, Good, and Mind were developed by Plato. For Middle Platonism, God was thought to be the single source of reality, perfect in character, with thought being his very essence.

39 Clement, *Stromata* 5.12, in *ANF*, 2:463–64.

universe, with no characteristics or limitations. The similarity of Clement's thought to Middle Platonism and his dependence on Middle Platonic positions are difficult to deny. His description of God must finally be described as a hybrid mix of Middle Platonism and early Christianity.

Other early Christian apologists such as Theophilus and Origen apply Middle Platonism in rejecting a physical location for Deity or any acceptance of God's materiality. Theophilus suggests that God is omnipresent, never confined to any one location:

> But this is the attribute of God, the Highest and Almighty, and the living God, not only to be everywhere present, but also to see all things and to hear all, and by no means to be confined in a place; for if He were, then the place containing Him would be greater than He; for that which contains is greater than that which is contained. For God is not contained, but is Himself the place of all.[40]

Middle Platonism stressed that, as an immaterial essence, God dwells everywhere simultaneously. Thus God's complete omnipresence, the Middle Platonic standard for God, had become the orthodox Christian standard as well. The Middle Platonism of Origen, the most Hellenized Christian father, is seen as he rejects a material nature for God. God is fully immaterial for Origen, as matter is inconsistent with the divine nature. He believes that only man exists in a body either in mortality or the hereafter:

> And if any one imagine that at the end material, i.e., bodily, nature will be entirely destroyed, he cannot in any respect meet my view, how beings so numerous and powerful are able to live and to exist without bodies, since it is an attribute of the divine nature alone—i.e., of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—to exist without any material substance, and without partaking in any degree of a bodily adjunct. Another, perhaps, may say that in the end every bodily substance will be so pure and refined as to be like the aether, and of a

40 Theophilus to Autolycus, 2.3, in *ANF*, 2:95.

> celestial purity and clearness. How things will be, however, is known with certainty to God alone, and to those who are His friends through Christ and the Holy Spirit.[41]

God must be immaterial as he could not be limited by having a physical location. A God limited by anything is no God for a Christian Middle Platonic philosopher. Thus, Theophilus and Origen completely accepted the Middle Platonic positions on the immateriality and omnipresence of God. These doctrines remain a permanent part of orthodox Christian belief.

Another Middle Platonic import easily identified is Justin Martyr's use of the Stoic Logos doctrine to define Christ and solve the problem of God's transcendence. Stoic doctrine taught of an eternal fiery material substance that is the basis of and is immanent in the universe. This substance, called Logos, or "Word," is found everyplace in the universe and causes all things to come into existence. Man's soul, in Stoic thought, is specifically thought to be a piece of this divine Logos, a fragment of God that dwells inside of mankind and gives humans their reason.[42] Justin is a Middle Platonist Christian with a decided Stoic twist.[43] He liberally applies the Stoic Logos doctrine to Christ, but at the same time accepts Middle Platonic notions of immateriality rather than Stoic materiality, declaring that even though the premortal Christ became embodied he still remains immanent within us:

> "That it is neither easy to find the Father and Maker of all, nor, having found Him, is it safe to declare Him to all." But these things our Christ did through His own power. For no one trusted in Socrates so as to die for this doctrine, but in Christ, who was partially known even by Socrates (for He was and is the Word who is in every man, and who foretold the things that were to come to pass both through the prophets and in His own person when He was made of like passions, and taught

41 Origen, *De Principiis* 1.6.4, in *ANF*, 4:262.
42 See Berchman, *From Philo to Origen*, 31.
43 See Armstrong, *Introduction*, 166–67.

> these things), not only philosophers and scholars believed, but also artisans and people entirely uneducated, despising both glory, and fear, and death; since He is a power of the ineffable Father, and not the mere instrument of human reason.[44]

Justin further adapts his Logos to Middle Platonic and Christian doctrine, believing that it is not just a fragment of the divine Logos that inhabits us, but Christ himself in his entirety. Justin's Logos is a compromise between the absolutes of Middle Platonism—which demanded a mediating God who simultaneously transcends the mundane material world of change and is immanent throughout the universe—and the early Christian belief in the material perfection of the resurrected Christ, a perfection that included both spatial location and duration in time. He mediates between an inaccessible God who has no existence within the universe, since God cannot come into contact with matter, and mundane man who is trapped in the material world. Because Christ is a Stoicized Middle Platonic Logos, he can reach beyond the universe to God, while yet being made incarnate among men. Justin continues:

> For each man spoke well in proportion to the share he had of the spermatic word [*spermatikos logos*]. . . . For next to God, we worship and love the Word who is from the unbegotten and ineffable God, since also He became man for our sakes, that, becoming a partaker of our sufferings, He might also bring us healing. For all the writers were able to see realities darkly through the sowing of the implanted word that was in them. For the seed and imitation imparted according to capacity is one thing, and quite another is the thing itself, of which there is the participation and imitation according to the grace which is from Him.[45]

As a Christian, Justin takes his philosophy farther than his pagan Middle Platonic counterparts, declaring that Christ as the Logos dwells entirely within us, not as a fragment of God, but Christ

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44 Justin, *Apology* 2.10, in *ANF*, 1:191–92.

45 Justin, *Apology* 2.13, in *ANF*, 1:193.

entire. Thus the Logos is seen as an immaterial being who dwells above the universe, in the hearts of human beings, and is embodied in the person of Jesus Christ. Justin is fully dependent upon a Stoicized Middle Platonic philosophy to help him make this determination.[46]

The furthest intrusion of Middle Platonic philosophy is seen in the church fathers Clement and Origen, but orthodox Christianity, especially as seen in the Creeds, rejects many aspects of

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46 In his effort to explain God as a being who is absolutely limitless and has no bounds whatsoever, Robinson may have unintentionally re-created aspects of the Middle Platonic Logos of Justin in the person of God the Father. Robinson seems to assert that God is a person who is embodied (see HWD, 87), yet one whose spiritual substance is present in every person and throughout the entire universe; in a body, yet fully transcending it. Robinson writes that "the Father has a body, not that his body has him" (HWD, 88). He also believes God's omnipresence consists of God being "spiritually present" in the universe (HWD, 77). Robinson's exact meaning is unclear here, but it seems that God would have a literal presence of spirit in the universe. If this is his position, then it seems that Robinson has come close to re-creating the controversy that the early church faced in its showdown with Greek philosophy in the first through third centuries A.D.

Robinson believes God to be absolute, with no restrictions on his omnipotence, but by doing so the LDS assertion that the body is important seems to be lessened. LDS doctrine asserts that a fulness of joy and majestic power are achieved in the union of body and soul (see D&C 88:15, 20, 28; 93:33–34; 131:7) and that an absence from the body is bondage (D&C 45:17; 138:50). Joseph Smith taught that "happiness consists in having a body" and that having a body brings power, for "all beings who have bodies have power over those who have not." Alma P. Burton, comp., *Discourses of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book: 1977), 82. Doctrine and Covenants 130:22 emphasizes a unity between God's body and spirit so complete that God *cannot* dwell within us in any fashion. Doctrine and Covenants 88:12 also makes it clear that it is God's power or influence that is omnipresent, not a literal spiritual presence; compare B. H. Roberts, *Outlines of Ecclesiastical History* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1950), 192; Bruce R. McConkie, *A New Witness for the Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 70; J. Reuben Clark Jr., *Behold the Lamb of God* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1962), 172. Robinson does not believe his rejection of restrictions regarding embodiment denies "the importance for Mormonism of God's corporeality and God's nature as an exalted man" (HWD, 90), but this is simply a non sequitur that Robinson needs to support. It seems conclusive that the LDS Church has canonized ontological limitations for its embodied God (see D&C 93:29, 33; Abraham 3:18); one is left to wonder if it is wise to apply absolutistic concepts originally developed by Greek philosophy to LDS doctrine.

Greek philosophy. Clement and, more especially, Origen were thoroughly steeped in Middle Platonism, each actually developing his own brand of Middle Platonic thought, although with expected Christian twists.[47] But after the heyday of Christian Middle Platonism and Neoplatonism in the late second and early third centuries there was a general backlash against philosophical speculation. Christians, especially those in the Latin West, began to downplay some of the more radical positions of Middle Platonism and Neoplatonism, such as subordination among members of the Godhead.[48] Indeed, Tertullian's exclamation, "What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem?"[49] shows that there was tension between Greek philosophy and Christian doctrine. However, it must be pointed out that Tertullian's objection is not to all Greek philosophy, but against any Middle Platonism that clashes with his own Stoicized version.[50] It appears that Tertullian is just as adept at reading Stoicism into Christian thought as his counterparts are at applying Platonism.

Middle Platonic Greek philosophy is firmly rooted in Christianity long before the debates of Nicaea. The respect and authority commanded by Middle Platonic thought in the Roman Empire proved irresistible even to Christians. Even with the Christian backlash against Greek philosophy in the fourth century, the infusion of Middle Platonism originally introduced in the second century remains firmly intact within orthodox Christian thought.[51]

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47 See note 7 and Berchman, *From Philo to Origen,* 116–17.

48 For example, during the Trinitarian debates that led up to the Council of Nicaea (A.D. 325), Athanasius objects to the radical subordination of the second and third persons *(hypostases)* of the Trinity, as proposed by Arius, accepted by Origen, and demanded by both Middle Platonic and Neoplatonic thought. Athanasius, *Contra Arianos,* 1, 14–17. Orthodox Christian thought, however, never rejected the basic Middle Platonic foundation put in place as early as Justin Martyr.

49 Tertullian, *Against Heretics* 7.1, in *ANF,* 3:246.

50 Tertullian's Stoicism is even more pronounced than Justin's. See Armstrong, *Introduction,* 168–74.

51 The church fathers, after Clement and Origen, continue to introduce aspects of Neoplatonic philosophy into later Christianity, but these influences are much more minor and subtle, involving such things as the transcendence of God, or the nature and destiny of the soul—including a Platonic theosis. See note 22 above. For example, Irenaeus created a hybrid Middle Platonic/Christian theosis

Early Judaic and Christian Beliefs concerning God and Theosis

Owen and Mosser, as well as Blomberg, present several challenges to LDS scholarship. Owen and Mosser lay down the challenge that the burden of proof is on Latter-day Saints to show that doctrines of the early church were replaced as the Hellenization of Christianity took place (see O&M, 67). They also claim that *theosis,* or the idea that man can become a God, is an idea rooted in Greek philosophy, and that Latter-day Saints show their own Hellenization by accepting such a doctrine (see O&M, 66). In like manner Blomberg challenges LDS scholars by claiming that there is never an account of the appearance of God and Christ in two separate bodies, either in scripture or in "the history of Christian experience" (HWD, 106). However, there is extremely strong evidence to suggest that theosis is a prominent doctrine of early Judaism and Christianity before the process of Hellenization takes place. The separate nature of the Godhead is also well attested, particularly in pseudepigraphic sources, important Judeo-Christian writings that have never been canonized. One outstanding example of both theosis and the separate nature of the Godhead is found in the *Ascension of Isaiah.*

Christian portions of the *Ascension of Isaiah,*[52] written about the middle of the second century, describe the members of the Godhead as separate embodied individuals, and depict the exalta-

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as he claimed that we "were not made gods at our beginning, but first we were made men, then, in the end, gods" (*Adversus Haereses* 4.37.4). Clement said that we should ascend with Christ "to the place where God is," that the faithful Christian life leads to "a life in conformity to God, with gods" (*Stromata* 7.10.55–56) and that we should learn from Christ "how it may be that man should become God" (*Protrepticus* 1.8.4). Even Athanasius, after he rejected much Neoplatonic thought, wrote that Christ "deified" his own "human body," and if Christ had not brought us "into the kingdom of heaven through our likeness to him," then "humanity would not have been deified" (*Contra Arianos* 2.70). These translations are found in Bettenson, *The Early Christian Fathers.* Despite the familiar language of theosis, the church fathers would have believed, as did Plato, that the level of deification man can achieve is limited since man ultimately remains unlike God.

52 See James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (hereafter *OTP*) (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1985), 2:143–76.

tion that is to be expected by faithful Christians. This pseudepigraphic work shows that this conservative Christian belief survived into the second century. In the text, Isaiah is escorted into the highest heaven where each member of the Godhead *physically* dwells. The Christian author first describes Christ while Isaiah approaches and is told to worship him. To make it easier for Isaiah to dwell in his presence, the intense manifestation of light, or glory,[53] surrounding Christ is lessened:

> And I saw one standing (there) whose glory surpassed that of all, and his glory was great and wonderful. And when they saw him, all the righteous whom I had seen and the angels came to him. And Adam and Abel and Seth and all the righteous approached first and worshiped him, and they all praised him with one voice, and I also was singing praises with them, and my praise was like theirs. And then all the angels approached, and worshiped, and sang praises. And he was transformed and became like an angel. And then the angel who led me said to me, "Worship this one. . . . This is the Lord of all the praise which you have seen." (*Ascension of Isaiah* 9:27–32)

It is clear that the person being worshiped is Christ, for in the next chapter Isaiah claims that "the Father of my Lord" commands the "Lord Christ, who will be called Jesus" to "descend through all the heavens" to perform his ministry on the earth and to descend into Sheol (*Ascension of Isaiah* 10:7–8).

Next seen is God, whose glory is not lessened for the benefit of Isaiah. Note the approachableness of God portrayed in the text, and the privileged position of the faithful as they stand in his presence and surround him in worship:

> And while I was still speaking, I saw another glorious (person) who was like him [Christ], and the righteous approached him, and worshiped, and sang praises,

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53 For a brief treatment on the phenomenon of light that surrounds God, see Roger Cook, God's "'Glory': More Evidence for the Anthropomorphic Nature of God in the Bible," at the FAIR web site: www.fair-lds.org/Pubs/Apologia/May/page7.html.

> and I also sang praises with them; but his glory was not transformed to accord with their form. And then the angels approached and worshiped him. (*Ascension of Isaiah* 9:33–34)

God is seen as a person and is approached as such by the faithful. The text next elaborates on God's left hand and the Holy Spirit, called the "second angel" and the "angel of the Holy Spirit," who stands to the left of God. Clear references are made to the Father and the Holy Spirit as anthropomorphic and embodied beings of great glory. The author, remaining true to the unsophisticated Christianity he espouses, simply takes the embodied and anthropomorphic nature of God and the Holy Spirit for granted, but does not elaborate on the nature of their bodies:

> And I saw the Lord and the second angel, and they were standing, and the second one whom I saw (was) on the left of my Lord. And I asked the angel who led me and I said to him, "Who is this one?" And he said to me, "Worship him, for this is the angel of the Holy Spirit who has spoken in you and also in the other righteous." (*Ascension of Isaiah* 9:35–36)

In the New Testament, Christ is accorded the privileged position of standing on the right hand of the Father (see Acts 7:56; Hebrews 1:3), and so it should be no surprise that the Holy Spirit has the next most important position—that of standing on God's left hand. God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit are all seen as separate anthropomorphic and embodied beings; each "stands," is "approached," and is individually "worshiped." Each member of the Godhead has location; each has a brilliant glory that surrounds his physical form.[54]

The text records that Isaiah's unique privilege of seeing God is brief and soon taken away. It is significant that the righteous dead, those who have passed on and wait for their resurrection and exaltation, have the unique privilege of remaining in God's immediate presence and seeing his glorious face, privileges not even accorded to angels on this occasion. Note that the text records that

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54 Parallels to the Book of Mormon should be noted, where the Holy Spirit is portrayed as a person standing before Nephi (see 1 Nephi 11:11).

it is the power possessed by the faithful themselves that allows them to continue to see God after the vision is withdrawn from Isaiah and the angels:

> And I saw the Great Glory while the eyes of my spirit were open, but I could not thereafter see, nor the angel who (was) with me, nor any of the angels whom I had seen worship my Lord. But I saw the righteous as they beheld with great power the glory of that one. (*Ascension of Isaiah* 9:37–38)

Earlier in the text, the angel escorting Isaiah tells him he has a throne, robes, and a crown waiting for him in the highest heaven. Significant is the physical transformation taking place in Isaiah as he ascends to God's presence. Isaiah is becoming like one of the divine beings who stand in God's presence, indeed becoming much like God:

> "For above all the heavens and their angels is placed your throne, and also your robes and your crown which you are to see." . . . And I said to the angel who (was) with me, for the glory of my face was being transformed as I went up from heaven to heaven. . . . And he said to me . . . "and (that) you may see the Lord of all these heavens and of these thrones being transformed until he resembles your appearance and your likeness. . . . Hear then this also from your companion . . . you will receive the robe which you will see, and also other numbered robes placed (there) you will see, and then you will be equal to the angels who (are) in the seventh heaven. . . . He who is to be in the corruptible world [Christ] has not (yet) been revealed, nor the robes, nor the thrones, nor the crowns which are placed (there) for the righteous." (*Ascension of Isaiah* 7:22, 25; 8:7, 10, 14–15, 26)

This is the language of theosis,[55] the belief that one gains salvation by becoming a god. Isaiah and the rest of the faithful are to be transformed and become even higher than the angels. They

55 *Theosis* is also called *apotheosis*.

will be enthroned in the highest heaven wearing crowns and robes and seated upon thrones—all symbols of royalty and divinity in the Judeo-Christian world.

At this point Isaiah is approached by Christ and the Holy Spirit. The manner in which they stand and converse with Isaiah is very personal, the transformed Isaiah having been welcomed into the company of Gods. Christ and the Holy Spirit explain to Isaiah what a unique privilege it is to see God, and then the two personages together turn and praise God:

> And my Lord approached me, and the angel of the Spirit, and said, "See how it has been given to you to see the Lord, and (how) because of you power has been given to the angel who (is) with you." And I saw how my Lord and the angel of the Holy Spirit worshiped and both together praised the Lord. And then all the righteous approached and worshiped, and the angels approached and worshiped, and all the angels sang praises. (*Ascension of Isaiah* 9:39–42)

Isaiah's privilege of seeing God was possible, as he says, because "the eyes of my spirit were open" (*Ascension of Isaiah* 9:37), a claim identical to Moses 1:11 in the LDS Pearl of Great Price. Three separate beings are seen in the *Ascension of Isaiah,* each having a physical location that in no way lessens their glory or ability to rule the universe. Christ and the Holy Spirit are seen as independent beings directing worship toward God, who is surrounded by the faithful in like acts of worship. Blomberg's suggestion that there is never an account of the appearance of God and Christ in two separate bodies in the history of Christian experience is disproved, as all three members are seen as independent embodied beings.[56]

Other pseudepigraphic accounts further illustrate the embodied nature of God in early Judeo-Christian thought. *First Enoch* (ca. 200 B.C.) fully reflects the Jewish understanding of an

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56 The Christian author of the *Ascension of Isaiah* has no problem with the embodiment of Holy Spirit, even though the spiritual body in which he is embodied demands a spatial location. It seems that he understands the Holy Spirit to be able to touch the minds and hearts of men (see *Ascension of Isaiah* 9:36) while retaining a physical location.

anthropomorphic and embodied Deity. Enoch is brought into the temple of God in the highest heaven where he sees God sitting in majesty upon his throne. Note that God is seated as an exalted man, wearing glorious raiment like an exalted man, and speaking like an exalted man:

> And I observed and saw inside it a lofty throne—its appearance was like crystal. . . . It was difficult to look at it. And the Great Glory was sitting upon it—as for his gown, which was shining more brightly than the sun, it was whiter than any snow. None of the angels were able to come in and see the face of the Excellent and the Glorious One; and no one of the flesh can see him—the flaming fire was round about him, and a great fire stood before him.[57] . . . And the Lord called me with his own mouth and said to me, "Come near to me, Enoch, and to my holy Word." And he lifted me up and brought me near to the gate, but I (continued) to look down with my face. But he raised me up and said to me with his voice, "Enoch." (*1 Enoch* 14:18–22, 24–25; 15:1)[58]

God has a face that Enoch is allowed to see, but the privilege is not extended to the angels who are outside of the temple. In *1 Enoch* 71 Enoch is again brought to the highest heaven. On this occasion the archangels leave the temple with God, whose title is alternately translated as "Head of Days"[59] or "Antecedent of Time," to welcome Enoch personally. God is understood to be walking forward with the heavenly council of the gods[60] as escorts, and meeting Enoch at the entrance of heaven. The author of *1 Enoch* writes: "Then the Antecedent of Time came with

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57 In like manner Paul teaches that God dwells "in the light which no man can approach unto; whom no man hath seen, nor can see" (1 Timothy 6:16); that is, of course, unless the man has been transformed and invited to see God (see Exodus 33:11; 34:29–30; Ezekiel 1:26–28; John 6:46; Acts 7:55–56; 2 Corinthians 12:3–4).

58 *OTP,* 1:21.

59 Tabor, *Paul's Ascent to Paradise,* 84.

60 See note 68 below.

Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, Phanuel" (*1 Enoch* 71:13).[61] The text continues by describing "the Antecedent of Time: His head is white and pure like wool and his garment is indescribable" (*1 Enoch* 71:10). A description of God's head appears in *1Enoch* 46:1: "At that place, I saw the One to whom belongs the time before time. And his head was white like wool."

Second Enoch, written at about the same time as the book of Revelation, also elaborates on the image of God given to man. The text speaks of God's actual face and the honor which the image of God, placed on each of our faces, must be given. Here the image of God given to man is taken literally, with man having great honor by wearing the very face of God. The preface to the text records that "Enoch teaches his sons so that they might not insult the face of any person, small or great." The text continues:

> The Lord with his own two hands created mankind; in a facsimile of his own face, both small and great, the Lord created [them]. And whoever insults a person's face, insults the face of a king, and treats the face of the Lord with repugnance. He who treats with contempt the face of any person treats the face of the Lord with contempt. He who expresses anger to any person without provocation will reap anger in the great judgment. He who spits on any person's face, insultingly, will reap the same at the Lord's great judgment. Happy is the person who does not direct his heart with malice toward any person, but who helps [the offended and] the condemned, and lifts up those who have been crushed, and shows compassion on the needy. (*2 Enoch* J 44:1–4)[62]

F. I. Anderson, commenting on the face of God in *2 Enoch* 44:1–4, writes:

> The idea is remarkable from any point of view. The universal kinship of the human race is both biological and theological. Whatever the diversity . . . every

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61 Tabor writes that God "actually comes out of his palace, escorted by his angels, to welcome Enoch. (71:9–10) Enoch is overcome as he beholds the indescribable glory of God." Tabor, *Paul's Ascent to Paradise,* 84.

62 *OTP,* 1:170.

> individual is "the face of the Lord." Here the *imago dei* is the basis for universalistic humane ethics.[63]

There can be no clearer declaration. God's face is divine and holy. It characterizes the ultimate perfection that any being can achieve, and contempt for the face of any man is contempt for the very face of God.

Scriptures throughout the Old and New Testaments also show that God is anthropomorphic and corporeal. A most intimate anthropomorphic action is seen as God sculpts man from clay, fixes his own image upon his face, places his mouth over his nostrils, and breathes the breath of life into Adam (see Genesis 2:7). God also appears as an enthroned anthropomorphic being in Ezekiel 1:26. Ezekiel describes the glorious light proceeding from God as he views God from his waist up and his waist down, as he is seated in glory upon his chariot/throne. The anthropomorphic action of God handing a scroll to Christ as he sits enthroned in the heavenly temple in the book of Revelation should also be noted. God holds a scroll in his right hand, which we might reasonably expect would be attached to an arm and body. Christ approaches God's location on the throne and takes the scroll out of God's hand (see Revelation 5:1–7). Thus it is clear that early Jews and Christians believed that God is a glorious embodied celestial being. He was thought to have location, form, and face, but his power and influence were not compromised by the limitation of a physical body.[64]

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63 *OTP*, 1:171 n. b.

64 Robinson surprisingly suggests that one cannot see the embodied nature of God clearly described in the biblical or other early Judeo-Christian documents (see HWD, 79, 91). The vast majority of contemporary scholarship sees the issue differently. They unequivocally declare that God is seen to be a glorified, humanlike person. Eichrodt writes that it is "perfectly possible for the deity to manifest himself both in the forces of Nature and in human form." Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. J. A. Baker (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967) 2:16, 20–23. Von Rad writes that the Hebrews understood God as "having human form." Gerhard Von Rad, *Theology of Israel's Historical Traditions*, trans. D. M. G. Stalker (New York: Harper, 1962), 1:145, 146; see also 146 n. 18; "Jahweh has the form of men." G. Ernest Wright indicates that God was "simply depicted as a person by means of a free and frank use of anthropomorphic language." He notes that God possesses "practically all the characteristics of a human being, including bodily form and personality." G. Ernest Wright, ed., *Interpreter's Bible* (New York: Abingdon, 1951), 1:362.

Theosis is clearly seen in the Old and New Testaments as the faithful are promised that they will be enthroned in God's presence. The book of Daniel exclaims that the "wise" shall gain their own glory and "shine as the brightness of the firmament" (Daniel 12:3; compare Matthew 13:43). Christ invites those who overcome to sit in his throne as he has overcome and sits with the Father in his throne (see Revelation 3:21). John also claims that thrones of judgment are given to the Saints and that they will *reign* with God and Christ (see Revelation 20:4, 6), wearing "white robes" (Revelation 6:11, 7:9–14) and crowns (Revelation 4:4, 10). Paul declares that the faithful will judge the world and angels (see 1 Corinthians 6:2–3). Paul also explains that faithful Christians have been raised up by God and enthroned with Christ in the heavenly realms (see Ephesians 2:4–7). James Tabor explains that "Paul's understanding of salvation involves a particularly Jewish notion of *apotheosis,* and would have been understood as such by his converts."[65]

Other pseudepigraphic sources likewise indicate a belief in an early Judeo-Christian theosis. *Second Baruch,* also written at about the same time as the book of Revelation, deals with the transformation the elect will experience at the resurrection:

> Also, as for the glory of those who proved to be righteous on account of my law, those who possessed intelligence in their life, and those who planted the root of

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Mark S. Smith likewise writes that in the Hebrew and other Middle Eastern cultures it was believed that God was an "elderly, bearded figure enthroned." Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh, and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990), 9. E. Theodore Mullen Jr. recognizes that the understanding of God in the Hebrew and other surrounding cultures was that of an aged judge who sits on his throne at the head of his heavenly assembly. E. Theodore Mullen Jr., *The Assembly of the Gods: The Divine Council in Canaanite and Early Hebrew Literature* (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1980), 120. F. Michaeli says the biblical view of God was that of a "living man" and "a human being," as quoted in Edmond Jacob, *Theology of the Old Testament* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1958), 39. Clyde Holbrook recognizes that "God is pictured as having physical form and features," and that "God is imaged in the form of a human body." Clyde A. Holbrook, *The Iconoclastic Deity: Biblical Images of God* (London: Associated University Presses, 1984), 39.

65 Tabor, *Paul's Ascent to Paradise,* 18.

> wisdom in their heart—their *splendor will then be glorified by transformations,* and the shape of their face will be changed into the light of their beauty so that they may acquire and receive the undying world which is promised to them. Therefore, especially they who will then come will be sad, because they despised my Law and stopped their ears lest they hear wisdom and receive intelligence. When they, therefore, will see that those over whom they *are exalted now* will then be *more exalted and glorified than they,* then both these and those will be changed, these into the *splendor of angels* and those into startling visions and horrible shapes. . . . Miracles, however, will appear at their own time to those who are saved because of their works and for whom the Law is now a hope, and intelligence, expectation, and wisdom a trust. For they shall see that world which is now invisible to them, and they will see a time which is now hidden to them. And time will no longer make them older. For they will live in the heights of that world and they will be like the angels and be equal to the stars. (*2 Baruch* 51:3–10)[66]

Second Enoch actually describes the exaltation of the prophet Enoch. Enoch is lifted up to the highest heaven where he is brought face to face with God. He is glorified and admitted as a member of the council of the gods:

> And Michael, the Lord's archistratig, lifted me up and brought me in front of the face of the Lord. And the Lord said to his servants, sounding them out, "Let Enoch join in and stand in front of my face forever!" And the Lord's glorious ones did obeisance and said, "Let Enoch yield in accordance with your word, O Lord!" And the glorious ones did obeisance and said, "Let him come up!" And the Lord said to Michael, "Go, and extract Enoch from [his] earthly clothing. And anoint him with my delightful oil, and put him into the clothes of my glory." And so Michael did, just

66 *OTP,* 1:638, emphasis added.

> as the Lord had said to him. He anointed me and he clothed me. And the appearance of that oil is greater than the greatest light, and its ointment is like sweet dew, and its fragrance myrrh; and it is like the rays of the glittering sun. And I looked at myself, and I had *become like one of his glorious ones, and there was no observable difference.* (*2 Enoch* J 22:6–10)[67]

Note the physical changes expected by faithful Christians in *2 Baruch* and *2 Enoch.* Both explain that a physical transformation will take place upon entrance into God's presence. Enoch notes that he actually becomes like one of the assembled members of the heavenly council, who in the Dead Sea Scrolls are given the title of gods.[68] If God is seen as an embodied celestial being of glory in early Judeo-Christian thought, surrounded by members of an exalted elite council of the gods, and if a man like Enoch can become a being of similar glory,[69] then theosis can be considered a prominent feature of early Christianity.

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67 *OTP,* 1:183, emphasis added.

68 The Dead Sea Scrolls describe members of the heavenly council and give them the title *gods.* This fragment refers to the gods of the council and the expectation that the author will join the ranks of the council as a member: "[El Elyon <God most high> gave me a seat among] those perfect forever, a mighty throne in the congregation of the gods. None of the kings of the east shall sit in it and their nobles shall not [come near it]. . . . For I have taken my seat in the [congregation] in the heavens And none [find fault with me]. I shall be reckoned with gods <*'elim*> and established in the holy congregation. . . . I shall be reckoned with gods, And my glory, with [that of] the king's sons (4Q491 [4QMa] 11, I, 11–24)." This translation is found in Morton Smith, *New Testament, Early Christianity, and Magic,* ed. Shaye J. D. Cohen (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 74–75; see Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven,* 58. The Dead Sea Scrolls give a whole new interpretation to 1 Corinthians 8:4–6.

69 *Second Enoch* records that after Enoch's ascension into heaven his ability to process and expound upon complex subjects had become equal to that of the gods:

> And the Lord summoned Vereveil, one of his archangels, who was wise, who records all the Lord's deeds. And the Lord said to Vereveil, "Bring out the books from the storehouses, and give a pen to Enoch and read him the books." And Vereveil hurried and brought me the books mottled with myrrh. And he gave me the pen from his hand. And he was telling me all the deeds of the Lord, the earth and the sea, and all the elements and the courses and the life

Thus the burden of proof seems to be on orthodox Christians to show that an independent Judeo-Christian theosis did not exist. The historical/cultural evidence is that early Christianity believed in a God who is embodied, that each member of the Godhead is anthropomorphic and embodied, and that a doctrine of theosis was firmly in place in the early Christian church.[70]

Conclusion

One lesson to be learned from a study of Greek metaphysics and orthodox Christianity is the seductive nature of Middle Platonic Greek philosophy. The absolutes of Greek metaphysical speculation can be very attractive when defining God, but the temptation to use them should be avoided. After all, from an LDS perspective, early Christianity's belief in God as a celestial embodied being fell victim to such speculations. God in orthodox Christian thought is no longer a person in the usually accepted sense. In fact, he is no longer a he, but rather an immaterial being

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> . . . and everything that it is appropriate to learn. And Vereveil instructed me for 30 days and 30 nights, and his mouth never stopped speaking. And, as for me, I did not rest for 30 days and 30 nights, writing all the symbols. And when I had finished, Vereveil said to me, "You sit down; write everything that I have explained to you." And I sat down for a second period of 30 days and 30 nights, and I wrote accurately. And I expounded 300 and 60 books. And the Lord called me; and he placed me to the left of himself closer than Gabriel. And I did obeisance to the Lord. (2 *Enoch* A 22:10–24:1)

Thus the differences between the gods (*'elohim*), which man is said to be only "a little lower than" (Psalm 8:4; see 8:4–6), and exalted man virtually disappear. Mortal man sins, will die, and is limited in knowledge, power, and glory. Enoch has now been transformed into an immortal glorified being of tremendous power. He has been cleansed from sin and glorified (2 *Enoch* A 22:6–10) and now resides in the highest heaven, closer to God than even the exalted Gabriel. Enoch's wisdom has also increased so that for 60 uninterrupted days and nights he has learned and then repeated back the gained information without error. Enoch now has all qualities of a divine being, i.e., a god.

70 Owen and Mosser speak elsewhere of how LDS scholars have been thus far successful in a *legitimate* attempt at showing a *historical/cultural* connection between Latter-day Saint and early Judeo-Christian belief; although they hope evangelicals will appropriately challenge LDS findings. Paul Owen and Carl Mosser, "Mormon Scholarship, Apologetics, and Evangelical Neglect: Losing the Battle and Not Knowing It?" *Trinity Journal* 19 NS 2 (fall 1998): 179–205.

totally other than man, fully incomprehensible and impossible to know.[71] The New Testament claims that we should become perfect as God is (see Matthew 5:48) and that one of the purposes of the Christian life is to know God (see John 17:3). However, it is difficult to say how we can know God, or be able to become like a God who is abstract and a mystery. How can we ever come to know or become like a being who is totally unlike us?

This review of *How Wide the Divide?* and Owen and Mosser's review of that book have shown that the metaphysical speculations of Middle Platonic Greek philosophy are certainly suspect in pushing a struggling and ailing Christianity over the edge into a complete apostasy. It is clear that the early Christians lived in a Hellenized society but that Middle Platonic metaphysical speculation remained foreign to them. It has been shown that the early Judeo/Christian beliefs included a strong theosis that is virtually identical to LDS doctrine and that God was seen as a fully embodied, corporeal, and anthropomorphic person. The concept of God's absoluticity that originated in Greek philosophy is quite attractive and beautiful in its own way, but it is often fraught with difficulties and pitfalls, many of which were generated beginning in the second century A.D., as early Christianity originally accepted notions of absoluticity.

Thanks must again be extended to Blomberg and Robinson for their unprecedented effort. All religions, indeed all aspects of the human experience, demand levels of faith. No religion is without doctrinal difficulties, and since the many interpretations of Christianity that exist today will continue to endure into the future, no consensus can be expected on many of the major issues that divide believers—including Latter-day Saints and orthodox Christians. However, careful discourse and an attempt at understanding are better than confrontation and indeed are the only options open to people who hope to emulate Christ. I hope that many similar discussions between the Latter-day Saints and evangelical communities will continue into the future.

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71 Recent attempts have, however, been made to lessen the distance between God and man in evangelical thought. For example, see Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, and David Basinger, *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1994).