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Not Completely Worthless

Barry R. Bickmore

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Introduction

When Stephen Robinson and Craig Blomberg wrote How Wide the Divide? A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation, they covered a lot of ground and were obviously limited by space constraints. They didn’t intend their book to be the end of fruitful discussion between evangelicals and Latter-day Saints but rather a beginning. Therefore, I do not have any particular problem with the idea of a group of evangelicals writing what they see as a more complete exposition of their point of view, in opposition to that of the Latter-day Saints. This is ostensibly the purpose of The Counterfeit Gospel of Mormonism—to respond to How Wide the Divide? by providing evidence for their faith and against the Latter-day Saint faith, in the process showing more clearly that Mormonism is really “another Gospel,” not fit to be called Christian.

If this is the goal of The Counterfeit Gospel of Mormonism, the chapter “Christ” by Ron Rhodes fails on a number of counts. For

1. According to his Web page, home.earthlink.net/~ronrhodes/RonRhodes.html, Rhodes is the president of Reasoning from the Scriptures Ministries and an adjunct professor of theology at Biola University, Southern Evangelical Seminary, and Golden Gate

instance, Rhodes does not respond to Robinson’s central argument, that behind mainstream Christianity’s creedal formulations lie extrabiblical assumptions and definitions that appear to have been adopted from the Greek philosophical schools. More important, Rhodes seems to have uncritically accepted some of the worst anti-Mormon caricatures of Latter-day Saint doctrine and spends a good deal of his chapter knocking down these straw men.

This is not to say Rhodes’s argumentation is completely without merit. He does in fact bring up a few legitimate points that Blomberg does not. These deserve a response, no matter what his failings. In this review I intend to rebut Rhodes’s most important arguments against the Latter-day Saint view of Christ and the Trinity and in the process clarify some aspects of the debate that he has not dealt with.

A Framework for Interpretation

It is a fundamental truth that nobody can interpret the Bible, or any other document, without supplying some set of assumptions and definitions external to the text. It just isn’t possible. Consider this example from the New Testament: “Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven” (Acts 2:5 NIV). At Pentecost, were there really Jews visiting from every nation or just the ones in that part of the world? Even in our own language, these same terms can be ambiguous. If I were to say, “Everyone is here,” would I necessarily mean everyone in the universe? One makes sense of such statements within an interpretive framework that lies outside the particular words used.

Craig Blomberg appears to have recognized and readily admitted this in How Wide the Divide? (see p. 142). Stephen Robinson made some limited attempts to show that many of the assumptions and definitions that mainstream Christians use to arrive at their doctrines about Christ and the Trinity were adopted from the pagan Greek philosophical schools and could not have been part of the original Christian message. In turn, Craig Blomberg made an at-

Seminary. He has a Th.D. in systematic theology from Dallas Theological Seminary and has been an associate editor of the Christian Research Journal.
tempt to neutralize this charge. Space considerations did not allow for a complete discussion, but if Rhodes had bothered to look up the footnoted references in *How Wide the Divide?* he would have been able to gain a more complete understanding of this most important issue. That mainstream Christianity’s doctrines are based on pagan philosophy is not a charge that can be passed by in silence because the Hellenization of Christian doctrine is a topic too well attested in the scholarly literature. Consider, for example, the following recent admission by a group of evangelical scholars:

The view of God worked out in the early church, the “biblical-classical synthesis,” has become so commonplace that even today most conservative theologians simply assume that it is the correct scriptural concept of God and thus that any other alleged biblical understanding of God . . . must be rejected. The classical view is so taken for granted that it functions as a preunderstanding that rules out certain interpretations of Scripture that do not “fit” with the conception of what is “appropriate” for God to be like, as derived from Greek metaphysics.

I am not suggesting that these evangelicals are advocating a concept of God in all respects identical to ours. While they believe that “the early Fathers did not sell out to Hellenism, but they did, on certain key points, use it to both defend and explain the Christian concept of God to their contemporaries,” some evangelical scholars are


4. Ibid.
beginning to realize the extent to which Greek metaphysics governs the boundaries of "acceptable" Christian theology and are attempting to unshackle themselves from its influence. Furthermore, they point out that people like Rhodes largely do not even recognize this influence at all—it is completely taken for granted.

In order to expand the discussion begun by Blomberg and Robinson, I intend to supply a few concrete examples where Latter-day Saints believe mainstream Christians have adopted Greek philosophical tenets in place of Hebrew thought forms. These examples will provide a framework for the discussion of how Latter-day Saints and evangelicals come to widely different conclusions about the very same biblical passages.

My first example is perhaps the most important: the kind of being God is. Is he a person with a body in human form, as the Latter-day Saints believe, or "a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions, immutable, immense, eternally incomprehensible," as the Westminster Confession of Faith states? The Vatican Council further explains that God's being is "a unique spiritual substance by nature, absolutely simple and unchangeable, [and] must be declared distinct from the world in fact and by essence." These definitions of God go beyond anything in the Bible, but they happen to coincide nearly exactly with those taught by the ancient Greek philosophers. For instance, Xenophanes (570–475 B.C.) conceived of "God as thought, as presence, as all powerful efficacy." He is one God—incorporeal, "unborn, eternal, infinite, . . . not moving at all [and] beyond human imagination." Empedocles (ca. 444 B.C.)

5. For recent discussions of this phenomenon from an LDS perspective, see Barry R. Bickmore, Restoring the Ancient Church: Joseph Smith and Early Christianity (Ben Lomond, Calif.: Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research, 1999); Richard R. Hopkins, How Greek Philosophy Corrupted the Christian Concept of God (Bountiful, Utah: Horizon, 1998).


claimed that God “does not possess a head and limbs similar to those of humans. . . . [He is] a spirit, a holy and inexpressible one.” 9 This concept of God was adopted by Christians, starting in the mid-second century, in an attempt to make sense of their faith in light of the assumptions they inherited from their Hellenistic culture. 10 Thus the Christian theologian Tertullian (ca. A.D. 200) could say, “The Father . . . is invisible and unapproachable, and placid, and (so to speak) the God of the philosophers.” 11

How did the Jews and Jewish Christians conceive of God before they moved out into the Hellenistic world? Christopher Stead, Ely Professor of Divinity Emeritus at Cambridge, writes that “The Hebrews . . . pictured the God whom they worshipped as having a body and mind like our own, though transcending humanity in the splendour of his appearance, in his power, his wisdom, and the constancy of his care for his creatures.” 12 In the early third century, the Christian theologian Origen argued against the Jewish and Jewish Christian belief in an anthropomorphic God, not by appealing to unanimous Christian tradition, but to the philosophers: “The Jews indeed, but also some of our people, supposed that God should be understood as a man, that is, adorned with human members and human appearance. But the philosophers despise these stories as fabulous and formed in the likeness of poetic fictions.” 13 Our evangelical friends interpret the anthropomorphic passages in the Bible allegorically, but Latter-day Saints see no compelling reason (apart from the assumptions of Greek philosophy) not to take Ezekiel quite literally when he says he saw “upon the throne, a form in human likeness” (Ezekiel 1:26 NEB). True, some passages describe God’s “wings” or

9. Ibid., 51.
10. For instance, Sanders, “Historical Considerations,” 72, writes, “Despite different attitudes taken by the fathers toward philosophy, the influence of Greek philosophical notions of God is universal, even among those who ‘repudiate’ philosophy.”
12. Stead, Philosophy in Christian Antiquity, 120.
“feathers” (e.g., Psalm 91:4), and the like, but these are always given in a clearly metaphorical context. What, then, was Ezekiel’s metaphor when he simply described what he saw?

Our neighbors might object that the biblical God cannot have a body, for that would contradict John 4:24. This verse can be translated “God is a spirit” but in modern translations is usually rendered “God is Spirit.” This passage is parallel to two others from John’s writings, where it is said that “God is light” (1 John 1:5) and “God is love” (1 John 4:8). Read in context, these passages are not metaphysical statements about God’s “being” but rather descriptions of God’s activity with respect to men. Stead explains how the ancient Hebrews would have interpreted God’s “spiritual” nature. “By saying that God is spiritual, we do not mean that he has no body . . . but rather that he is the source of a mysterious life-giving power and energy that animates the human body, and himself possesses this energy in the fullest measure.”

In fact, some of the ancients, like the Latter-day Saints, considered spirit itself to be material. Origen complained that some of these actually used John 4:24 to prove that God is material! “Fire and spirit, according to them, are to be regarded as nothing else than a body.” In contrast, historian J. W. C. Wand (formerly the Anglican bishop of London) writes that the Hellenized Christians learned what it meant for God to be “a spirit” from the Neoplatonists:

It is easy to see what influence this school of thought [i.e., Neoplatonism] must have had upon Christian leaders. It was from it that they learnt what was involved in a metaphysical sense by calling God a Spirit. They were also helped to free themselves from their primitive eschatology and to get rid of that crude anthropomorphism which made even Tertullian [A.D. 160–220] believe that God had a material body.

Rhodes also objects that since God is said to be “omnipresent,” the divine nature cannot be limited to a body (see pp. 104–5). Apparently Jesus’ body is thought to be attached to the omnipresent divine nature as some sort of appendage. Again, Latter-day Saints do not take such passages as metaphysical statements about God’s “being” but as indications that God’s power and knowledge simultaneously extend to the farthest reaches of the universe (see D&C 88:6–13, 41). Apparently the ancient Jews and Jewish Christians agreed that God’s body was not a limitation.17

The Greeks had a strong tendency to take statements about God in an extreme metaphysical—even mathematical—sense, whereas the Hebrews spoke in more relative terms. Consider Christopher Stead’s statement about how the biblical authors spoke of God’s immutability.

The Old Testament writers sometimes speak of God as unchanging . . . . In Christian writers influenced by Greek philosophy this doctrine is developed in an absolute metaphysical sense. Hebrew writers are more concrete, and their thinking includes two main points: (1) God has the dignity appropriate to old age, but without its disabilities . . . ; and (2) God is faithful to his covenant promises, even though men break theirs.18 (cf. Isaiah 40:28; Exodus 34:9–10)

What about all those statements about God’s “eternity”? While mainstream Christian theologians, influenced by Greek philosophy, take this in an absolute sense, the biblical writers once again spoke in a more relative sense. For example, God is described as “from everlasting to everlasting” (Psalm 41:13 NEB), but the Hebrew word for “everlasting” is ṣālām, which literally means “(practically) eternity,” “time out of mind,” or “forever,” expressing the concept of a really, really long time.19

In any number of examples from the Bible, such superlative terms are obviously used in a limited, relative sense. For instance, Exodus 31:16 says, "The Israelites shall keep the sabbath, they shall keep it in every generation as a covenant for ever" (NEB). Perhaps recognizing the ambiguity in the Hebrew terms used, the evangelical translators of the New International Version (NIV) render the passage, "The Israelites are to observe the Sabbath, celebrating it for the generations to come as a lasting covenant" (Exodus 31:16–17). So is it "every generation" or "the generations to come"? Were the Israelites to keep this covenant "for ever," or was it just a "lasting covenant"? Incidentally, the salient Hebrew word in this verse is the familiar ʿālām, the very word the Bible uses to describe God's eternity.

If it weren't for such linguistic ambiguities, Leviticus 16:34 might be especially troubling. "This shall become a rule binding on you for all time, to make for the Israelites once a year the expiation required by all their sins" (NEB). Of course, the NIV translates ʿālām here so as to make it a "lasting rule" rather than a "rule . . . for all time" or an "everlasting statute" (KJV).

As we can see, the philosophical framework within which Latter-day Saints interpret the scriptural passages describing the attributes of God is widely different from the one used by most mainstream theologians. In addition, a good case can be made to show that the LDS framework is very much like that of the ancient Hebrews and Jewish Christians. And yet, time and time again we will see that Rhodes, like most anti-Mormon writers, seeks to establish some contradiction between the scriptures and LDS doctrine by interpreting scriptural passages within his framework of ideas without taking into account that of the Latter-day Saints or even the biblical writers. In the following responses to his specific criticisms, I will expose this faulty methodology.

"The Only Begotten Son"

Rhodes's first target is the LDS view of the virgin birth, and here he shows not only a lack of understanding with respect to the LDS interpretive backdrop but also a willingness to twist the words of his
LDS sources to make them sound offensive to evangelical ears. In order to justify his assertion that Latter-day Saints believe Jesus "was begotten through sexual relations between a flesh-and-bone Heavenly Father and Mary" (p. 121), he quotes several unofficial statements of LDS leaders, justifying himself by showing that Latter-day Saints consider the words of the living prophets as scripture—despite the distinctly antifundamentalist view of scripture held by the Latter-day Saints.\footnote{Rhodes quotes Brigham Young (see p. 119), saying that any of his sermons are as good as any scripture in the Bible. However, he fails to recognize that Latter-day Saints have an extremely broad view of "scripture." For instance, Doctrine and Covenants 68:4 says in relation to any priesthood holder, "And whatsoever they shall speak when moved upon by the Holy Ghost shall be scripture." In fact, in our view even our canonized scriptures are not free from the "mistakes of men" (see the title page of the Book of Mormon). Especially relevant is the following comment by Brigham Young: "I am so far from believing that any government upon this earth has constitutions and laws that are perfect, that I do not even believe that there is a single revelation, among the many God has given to the Church, that is perfect in its fulness. The revelations of God contain correct doctrine and principle, so far as they go; but it is impossible for the poor, weak, low, grovelling, sinful inhabitants of the earth to receive a revelation from the Almighty in all its perfections." \textit{Journal of Discourses}, 2:314.}

In any case, even while expanding the field of sources for "official" LDS doctrine, Rhodes can't seem to provide any compelling evidence to make his case. What he \textit{does} provide is a long series of statements by LDS leaders to the effect that Jesus is the literal,
biological Son of the Father in the flesh. But this is simply a by-product of our understanding of God the Father as an anthropomorphic being with a flesh-and-bone body (the Father was the source of Jesus’ Y chromosome) and says nothing about the mechanics of conception. For instance, Rhodes quotes Bruce R. McConkie and James E. Talmage to this effect, but what did they actually say about the mechanics of Jesus’ conception? Talmage says he was begotten “not in violation of natural law but in accordance with a higher manifestation thereof.”

McConkie says:

How and by what means and through whose instrumentality does such a conception come? ...

... When God is involved, he uses his minister, the Holy Ghost, to overshadow the future mother and to carry her away in the Spirit. She shall conceive by the power of the Holy Ghost, and God himself shall be the sire. ... A son is begotten by a father: whether on earth or in heaven it is the same.

These descriptions do not go beyond what the scriptures affirm, no matter what seamy innuendos Rhodes wants to pull out of them.

He seems puzzled (see pp. 122-23) by McConkie’s statement that “Our Lord is the only mortal person ever born to a virgin, because he is the only person who ever had an immortal Father.” But then, if a resurrected, exalted man can transport himself through solid walls

23. Rhodes also quotes Orson Pratt and Brigham Young, who say that the Father must have been married to Mary at the time of Jesus’ conception (pp. 121-22). Certainly these are more suggestive (and speculative) than any of the other quotations Rhodes provides, but they still do not necessarily enlighten us about how Pratt and Young thought the conception of Jesus physically occurred. Furthermore, Rhodes cites Brigham Young’s statement from an 1866 edition of the Deseret News and Pratt’s from The Seer. By what stretch of the imagination does he characterize these as “official” teachings?
and leave them intact (see Luke 24:36–40), I see no reason why Jesus’ conception could not have left Mary truly still a “virgin.” Thus, President Ezra Taft Benson could say both that “Jesus Christ is the Son of God in the most literal sense”25 and that “his mortal mother, Mary, was called a virgin, both before and after she gave birth. (See 1 Nephi 11:20.)”26 I do not pretend to know (as Rhodes does) what anyone’s private speculations about the particular mode of conception might have been. However, Latter-day Saints have generally been content not to publicly speculate about such unimportant topics, and we see attempts like Rhodes’s to “fill in the blanks” for us as rather silly. (Incidentally, we would also see attempts to definitively explain how Jesus transported himself through a solid wall without specific revelation on the subject as silly.)

This discussion of Jesus’ conception brings up the important question of how Jesus is uniquely the “Son of God.” Mormons equate Jesus’ unique Sonship with his incarnation. That is, he is the only son of God with respect to the flesh (see Mosiah 15:3), but one of many children of God with respect to his spirit (see Abraham 3:22–25). In addition, he was uniquely the Son of God even before his incarnation because he “was foreordained before the foundation of the world” (1 Peter 1:20; cf. Ether 3:14; How Wide the Divide? 136) to his calling. Thus, while Latter-day Saints connect Jesus’ unique Sonship with the incarnation, we believe it is proper to refer to him as the “Only Begotten” even in the premortal existence. Mainstream Christians, on the other hand, believe that Jesus has always existed as the Son within the Trinity, “eternally generated” from the Father,27 and they do not specifically connect Jesus’ unique Sonship to the incarnation.

Rhodes uses several scriptures (Hebrews 1:2; Colossians 1:13–14, 17; and John 8:54–58) to conclude that Jesus existed as “the Son of God” before the incarnation (p. 125). As we have seen, he is missing

26. Ibid.
the point. Likewise, when he trots out passages from the Book of Mormon (such as 2 Nephi 27:23; 29:7, 9; Mosiah 3:5, 8) in support of the eternal nature of Jesus Christ as God, he simply ignores the LDS (and ancient Hebrew) usage of words like *eternity*. He also expends a great deal of effort showing that Greek terms such as *firstborn* and *Only-Begotten* don’t necessarily require the interpretation the Latter-day Saints give them (see pp. 124–27), but he does not acknowledge Stephen Robinson’s demonstration (see *How Wide the Divide?* 138–39) that the LDS view reflects a legitimate interpretation of such words.

One argument Rhodes uses is the following:

Many Mormons, including Stephen Robinson, appeal to Psalm 2:7 in an attempt to prove that Jesus was begotten of the Father. However, Acts 13:33, 34 makes such a view impossible, for this passage teaches that Jesus’ resurrection from the dead by the Father is a *fulfillment* of the statement in Psalm 2:7, “You are my Son; today I have become your Father.” (p. 124)

This is a legitimate point if the object is to establish that *begotten* was sometimes used in a more symbolic sense. However, I fail to grasp why this passage would be any more troubling for Latter-day Saints than for evangelicals, who believe Jesus is “eternally begotten.” The resurrection of Jesus represents the complete fulfillment of his incarnation, so this passage fits very well with the LDS understanding indeed. In fact, the LDS interpretation receives significant historical support. For example, J. N. D. Kelly, commenting on a passage from Ignatius of Antioch (ca. A.D. 110, reputed to have been a disciple of John), says this: “His divine Sonship dates from the incarnation.... In tracing His divine Sonship to His conception in Mary’s womb, he was simply reproducing a commonplace of pre-Origenist theology; the idea did not convey, and was not intended to convey, any denial of His pre-existence.”

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Jesus as Creator

Rhodes's strongest argument against the LDS view that Jesus is one of a number of spirit children of God is his use of Colossians 1:16–17: "For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him: And he is before all things, and by him all things consist." Rhodes comments, "The words 'thrones,' 'dominions,' 'principalities,' and 'powers' were words used by rabbinical Jews in biblical times to describe different orders of angels (see Romans 8:38; Ephesians 1:21; 3:10; 6:12; Colossians 2:10, 15)" (p. 127). Thus if Jesus created the angels, he couldn't possibly be their "spirit brother."

I can certainly see how one might read the passage in this way, but in fact its meaning is not so cut-and-dried. For instance, Romans 8:38 actually separates "angels" from "principalities and powers," and thus seems to militate against Rhodes's argument for the rabbinical interpretation: "For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come . . ." Other passages are ambiguous in meaning (see Colossians 2:10, 15; Ephesians 1:21), while some Rhodes fails to mention specifically speak of the "principalities and powers" of this world (see Luke 12:11; Romans 13:1; Ephesians 6:12; and Titus 3:1). Furthermore, the very passage in question seems not to include spirits among Christ's creations. Paul goes on in Colossians 1:20–21, "And, having made peace through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile all things unto himself; by him, I say, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven. And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath he reconciled." Does Paul here include Satan and his angels when he says Christ has reconciled "all things" in heaven and earth to himself? I think not. Again, Paul does not even seem to include the spirits of men among the "all things" Christ created, since he sets them apart by saying, "And you . . .," referring of course to believing Christians. He couldn't have included unbelievers in the "reconciliation"; otherwise, he wouldn't have qualified the prospects of reconciliation for his audience: "If ye continue in the faith . . ." (Colossians 1:23).
Let us also consider our interpretation and Rhodes’s argument within the broader context: the nature of creation. According to the earliest Jewish and Christian belief, God doesn’t “create” out of nothing. In his 1990 presidential address to the British Association for Jewish Studies, Peter Hayman asserted the following:

Nearly all recent studies on the origin of the doctrine of *creation ex nihilo* have come to the conclusion that this doctrine is not native to Judaism, is nowhere attested in the Hebrew Bible, and probably arose in Christianity in the second century C.E. in the course of its fierce battle with Gnosticism. The one scholar who continues to maintain that the doctrine is native to Judaism, namely Jonathan Goldstein, thinks that it first appears at the end of the first century C.E., but has recently conceded the weakness of his position in the course of debate with David Winston.29

Gerhard May has convincingly shown that where these early texts say God created out of “nothing” or “non-being,” etc., they were using a common ancient idiom to say that “something new, something that was not there before, comes into being; whether this something new comes through a change in something that was already there, or whether it is something absolutely new, is beside the question.”30 For instance, the Greek writer Xenophon wrote that parents “bring forth their children out of non-being.”31 Philo of Alexandria wrote that Moses and Plato were in agreement in accepting a pre-existent material, but also that God brings things “out of nothing into being” or “out of non-being.”32 Therefore, in view of this com-

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31. Xenophon, quoted in May, *Creatio Ex Nihilo*, 8.

mon usage and the many explicit statements by ancient authors regarding preexistent matter, we must rule out a belief in *creatio ex nihilo* unless such a belief is explicitly stated. We do not find such explicit statements anywhere until the mid-second century with the Gnostic teacher Basilides and later the Christian apologists Tatian and Theophilus of Antioch.33

Clearly, when Paul said that Christ created “all things,” the apostle did so in a sense limited by his underlying interpretive framework. Likewise, the Latter-day Saints often say Christ created “all things” but limit this statement to the material universe.

**The Divine Names**

Four names or titles are commonly used to denote God in the Old Testament: El (“God”), Elohim (“God” or “gods”), Elyon (“Most High”), and Yahweh (equivalent to “Jehovah”).34 Most mainline Christians see all these designations as referring to one divine being. However, Latter-day Saint usage is much more complicated. On one hand, the divine names can refer to specific persons; for example, El or Elohim usually refers to the Father, and Yahweh usually refers to the Son. On the other hand, they have also been used as titles in reference to more than one divine person. Both the Father and the Son have been called “Jehovah” (D&C 109:34, 42, 68; 110:3). For instance, Joseph Smith said, “Let us plead the justice of our cause; trusting

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33. See Frances Young, “‘Creatio Ex Nihilo’: A Context for the Emergence of the Christian Doctrine of Creation,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 44 (1991): 141. Even as late as the turn of the third century, Tertullian had to take the more ancient usage into account when arguing for the new doctrine. “And even if they were made out of some (previous) matter, as some will have it, they are even thus out of nothing, because they were not what they are.” Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 2.5, in *ANF*, 3:301.

The only evangelical response to this work I have seen is by a graduate student at Marquette University, Paul Copan. Copan challenges May’s assertion that *creatio ex nihilo* is a postbiblical invention, but in fact does not deal with May’s primary evidence—the description by ancient authors of creation as “out of nothing” where preexistent matter is clearly presupposed. Paul Copan, “Is *Creatio Ex Nihilo* a Post-Biblical Invention? An Examination of Gerhard May’s Proposal,” *Trinity Journal* 17NS (1996): 77–93.

in the arm of Jehovah, the Eloheim, who sits enthroned in the heav­
ens.”\(^{35}\) The Latter-day Saints believe that the Bible passages that link
Yahweh with Elohim or Elyon (see, for example, Isaiah 43:12–13; 45:21–22) refer to a “divine investiture of authority”; there the Son is
allowed to speak in the first person as the Father.\(^{36}\) Thus where
Moses says, “The Lord our God is one Lord” (Deuteronomy 6:4),
Latter-day Saints see the phrase as an expression of the perfect unity
of the Godhead.

Rhodes apparently does not understand the nuances of LDS use
of these terms and lists a series of Bible passages in which Jehovah
and Elohim are equated. “The Mormon doctrine can easily be de­
bunked by verses in the Bible which demonstrate that Elohim and
Jehovah are one and the same God” (p. 129).

But consider the following passage found in both the Dead Sea
Scrolls and Septuagint versions of Deuteronomy: “When the Most
High parcelled out the nations, when he dispersed all mankind, he
laid down the boundaries of every people according to the number
of the sons of God; but the Lord’s [Yahweh’s] share was his own
people, Jacob was his allotted portion” (Deuteronomy 32:8–9 NEB).\(^{37}\)
Based on this and other passages, some Bible scholars now con­
clude that the Israelites originally believed El to be the high God and
Yahweh to be the chief among the “sons of El”—the second God and
chief archangel who had special responsibility for Israel.\(^{38}\)

\(^{35}\) *History of the Church*, 5:94. Likewise, Brigham Young spoke the following with
reference to the Father: “We obey the Lord, Him who is called Jehovah, the Great I AM, I
am a man of war, Elohim, etc.” Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 12:99.

\(^{36}\) “The Father and the Son: A Doctrinal Exposition by the First Presidency and the
Twelve,” in James E. Talmage, *The Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984),

\(^{37}\) The NEB follows the Dead Sea Scrolls and Septuagint versions here.

\(^{38}\) See, for example, Otto Eissfeldt, “El and Yahweh,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 1
(1956): 25–30; Margaret Barker, *The Great Angel: A Study of Israel’s Second God* (Louis­
ville, Ky.: Westminster, 1992). For a good summary of the current scholarly debate, see
Larry W. Hurtado, “What Do We Mean by ‘First-Century Jewish Monotheism?’” in *Society
1993), 348–68.
Certainly belief in two Gods is a debated point and beyond the scope of this review, but it is beyond debate that this was a standard early Christian interpretation of the passage. As late as the fourth century, the great historian and bishop Eusebius of Caesarea could write, “In these words [Deuteronomy 32:8] surely he names first the Most High God, the Supreme God of the Universe, and then as Lord His Word, Whom we call Lord in the second degree after the God of the Universe.”39 A similar interpretation of these verses is found in the Jewish Christian Clementine Recognitions, in which Peter says, “But to the one among the archangels who is greatest, was committed the government of those who, before all others, received the worship and knowledge of the Most High God. . . . Thus the princes of the several nations are called gods. But Christ is God of princes, who is Judge of all.”40 Indeed, according to Margaret Barker, in a number of Jewish Apocalyptic texts there are actually two Yahwehs. Both the High God and principal angel are so designated.41

Clearly the LDS use of the divine names is complicated, so it is perhaps comprehensible that Ron Rhodes would misunderstand. However, it is equally clear that the LDS use has unambiguous precedents in ancient Jewish and Christian writings.

The Oneness of the Godhead

One feature of the New Testament all Christians must come to terms with is that in some passages the Father is represented as “the only true God” (John 17:3), while in others the Son and Holy Spirit are also called “God” (John 1:1; 14:26; Acts 13:2). How can this apparent contradiction be resolved? We can readily see that two disparate definitions of God must lead to different conclusions regarding this question.

In harmony with their definition of God as an indivisible, eternal, unchanging spiritual “essence,” mainstream Christians like

41. See Barker, The Great Angel, 81.
Rhodes say that the members of the Trinity are separate “persons” who share a single “Divine Being.” All three persons have always existed in the same relationship to one another, and no hierarchy exists within the Trinity. That is, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit do not differ in rank or glory. On the other hand, Latter-day Saints believe the members of the Godhead are separate beings, and so in a sense we believe in more than one God. However, Latter-day Saints also speak of “one God” in two senses. First, the Godhead is “one” in will, purpose, love, and covenant. Second, the Father is the absolute monarch of the known Universe, and all others are subject to him.

Rhodes disputes the LDS view of the divine unity in two ways. First, he disputes the subordinationist interpretation we apply to John 14:28, where Jesus says, “My Father is greater than I.” Rhodes comments,

In response, we must point out that Jesus in John 14:28 is not speaking about His nature or His essential being (Christ had earlier said “I and the Father are one” in this regard—John 10:30), but is rather speaking of His lowly position in the incarnation. Simply put, Christ is “equal” to the Father in regard to His Godhood but “inferior” to the Father in regard to His manhood. . . . During the time of the incarnation, Jesus functioned in the world of humanity, and this of necessity involved Jesus being positionally lower than the Father. (pp. 130–31)

Furthermore, he adds that while the Father is said to be “greater” than Jesus, Jesus is said to be “better” than the angels (Hebrews 1:4), underscoring the idea that Jesus is “positionally” subordinate to the Father, but “by nature” above the angels (p. 131).

Certainly Rhodes reads quite a lot into the terms greater and better, but, more important, he again appears to misunderstand, or at least misapply, the nuances of LDS theology. In our system, to say that Jesus is subordinate to the Father in rank and glory implies absolutely nothing about his “essential nature.” Mormons see gods, angels, and men as having the same “essential nature,” as Rhodes appears to realize (p. 120). Since we do not equate “God” with some indivisible, eternally unchanging spirit essence, it makes perfect sense
to call more than one person "God" and consider them to differ in rank and glory.

And in fact, the pre-Nicene church (excluding the Modalist heretics) universally held this view, even after the Greek concept of God was adopted. Kelly of Oxford University notes that even at the Council of Nicea, the majority party believed "that there are three divine hypostases [or persons], separate in rank and glory but united in harmony of will."42 Richard Hansen writes, "Indeed, until Athanasius began writing, every single theologian, East and West, had postulated some form of Subordinationism. It could, about the year 300, have been described as a fixed part of catholic theology."43 Henry Bettenson writes that "Subordinationism... was pre-Nicene orthodoxy."44

This doctrine took various forms, depending on the particular concept of God involved. Within Jewish Christianity, where God was often conceived of as having a body in human form, Jesus and the Holy Spirit were described both as gods, worthy of worship, and the chief among the archangels.45 (For instance, see the passage from the Clementine Recognitions quoted above.) While Latter-day Saints generally do not refer to the Son and Spirit as "angels," such a designation is consistent with our belief that Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and all angels and men are "sons of God" (Job 38:7), differing in degree and power, but not in essential nature.

An early second-century Jewish Christian document, the Shepherd of Hermas, speaks of "the angel of the prophetic Spirit"46 and of Jesus as the "glorious . . . angel" or 'most venerable . . . angel.'47 Justin Martyr (ca. A.D. 150) wrote that Jesus is "another God [Gk deuterōs theos = 'second God'] subject to the Maker of all things . . . who is . . .

45. See Daniélov, The Theology of Jewish Christianity, 146.
46. The Pastor of Hermas, Commandment 11, in ANE, 2:27.
distinct from Him who made all things—numerically, I mean, not [distinct] in will."48 He designated the Son as "this power which the prophetic word calls God . . . and Angel"49 and followed in the same vein: "We reverence and worship Him and the Son who came forth from Him and taught us these things, and the host of other good angels who are about Him and are made quite like Him, and the Prophetic Spirit."50 Justin Martyr also maintained that the Son is "in the second place, and the prophetic Spirit in the third."51

Many other examples could be cited, but it is important to note that this "angel Christology" was not some aberration but was derived from various Bible passages that refer to "the Angel of Yahweh," who is in fact Yahweh himself.52 For example, in Judges 13 the "angel of Yahweh" appears to Manoah and his wife. When he disappears, Manoah says, "We are doomed to die, we have seen God" (Judges 13:22 NEB). Even more interesting is the frequency with which Yahweh and the two angels who appeared to Abraham (see Genesis 18–19) are called "men."53

Rhodes also objects to the LDS understanding of the divine unity on the basis of his idiosyncratic interpretation of the "oneness" passages in John's Gospel (see pp. 132–33). He asserts that John's claim

49. Ibid., 127, in ANF, 1:264.
50. Justin Martyr, First Apology 6, in William A. Jurgens, The Faith of the Early Fathers (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1970), 1:51. Father Jurgens insists that this is the correct translation of Justin's statement and admits that here Justin "apparently [made] insufficient distinction between Christ and the created angels." Father Jurgens continues, "There are theological difficulties in the above passage, no doubt. But we wonder if those who make a great deal of these difficulties do not demand of Justin a theological sophistication which a man of his time and background could not rightly be expected to have." Jurgens, Faith of the Early Fathers, 1:56 n. 1. "This passage presents us with considerable difficulties. The word 'other,' used in relation to the angels, suggests that Jesus himself is an angel." Robert M. Grant, The Early Christian Doctrine of God (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1966), 81.
52. For a complete discussion of the "Angel of Yahweh," see Barker, The Great Angel.
that Jesus and the Father are “one” (John 10:30–33; 17:21–24) clearly means a oneness of nature: the Jews were prepared to stone Jesus for saying this because he was “claiming to be God” (p. 132). “But the context of John 17:21—where Jesus prayed that the disciples may be one ‘just as you [Father] are in me and I am in you’—is entirely different. In this context, the Greek word for ‘one’ refers to unity among people in the midst of their diversity” (p. 133, emphasis and brackets in original). On the contrary, Jesus’ statement that the oneness of his disciples was ideally to be “just as you [Father] are in me and I am in you” is the only clear comparison of anything in the Bible with the divine unity. The “context” in which we are supposed to understand the ideal unity of Jesus’ disciples is directly supplied by Jesus. It is the divine unity itself.

Rhodes’s discussion of Matthew 28:19 is equally mistaken. Is it really so significant that Jesus is said to baptize in “the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit” (NEB)? Does the fact that the Godhead is referred to as having a single “name” really mean they are a single being? Equating oneness of name with oneness of being overlooks the common ancient and modern usage where someone’s “name” is equated with his or her “authority.” Someone could say, “I come in the name of the King,” just as Jesus said, “I am come in my Father’s name” (John 5:43). So also, Christ’s ministers baptize by the authority of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, which is a single authority and power.

If nothing else, it should be clear that the LDS interpretation of the divine unity is quite possible, given the information in the Bible, and in fact this interpretation receives significantly more historical support from the earliest Christian documents than does the alternative Rhodes supports.

The “Two Natures” of Christ

The foregoing discussion of the “nature” of Christ relative to God, angels, and men brings up another of Rhodes’s objections. He complains:
Stephen Robinson in the book *How Wide the Divide?* [p. 83] makes reference to the "unbiblical doctrine of the two natures in Christ, which was added to historic Christianity by the Council of Chalcedon in A.D. 451." While the Chalcedon Creed does teach the doctrine of the two natures of Christ, this creed does not constitute the origin of the doctrine. Contrary to Mormons, this doctrine is not something that is foreign to Scripture; it is derived *directly from its pages.* (p. 134, emphasis in original)

He goes on to argue that "Throughout Scripture we find constant witness to the fact that the incarnate Christ possessed both a human and a divine nature" (p. 134). Here he apparently misunderstands what Robinson was asserting and uses this distorted interpretation to perpetuate the falsehood that Mormons do not think of Christ as truly divine.

Of course, the Council of Chalcedon wasn't the *origin* of the doctrine of two natures—the councils did not bring doctrines into existence *ex nihilo.* The doctrine of two natures was that Jesus' divine nature is the omnipresent "spirit essence" the Hellenized Christians defined as God, and since this essence is "without body, parts, or passions," it cannot have been the part of Jesus that underwent suffering, emotion, and death. Thus Jesus must have possessed a human body and soul *in addition to* his divine nature. The original doctrine, on the other hand, was what Kelly discusses as a spirit Christology.54 That is, the Word entered a human body, just as other men's spirits do. As Ignatius of Antioch (ca. A.D. 110) put it, "God the Word did dwell in a human body, being within it as the Word, even as the soul also is in the body."55

Clearly the original formulation could not last once the Hellenistic view of God was universally adopted. Evangelical scholar John Sanders explains how the change was accomplished:

In the East the Cappadocian fathers (Basil, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus) [late fourth century] helped to shape the orthodox belief on the incarnation. They agreed with the Arians that the divine nature was impassible, immutable, illimitable and transcended all characteristics. However, using the newly developed doctrine of the two natures of Christ (human and divine), they were able to rebut the charge that the suffering of Christ implied that the Son was not of the same substance as the Father. The Son, sharing the divine substance, was incapable of change. Since Jesus is both the Son of God and human, and since only the human nature of Christ underwent change, it could be argued that the Son was fully God. This became the orthodox answer to the Arian challenge. 56

The Atonement of Jesus Christ

Rhodes's final significant attack on LDS doctrine is a travesty. He actually contends that Latter-day Saints believe Jesus atoned only for the effects of Adam’s transgression but not for our personal sins (see pp. 135–36). An exchange of several e-mails with Ron Rhodes 57 did not clarify matters, and he still claims, “Having read many Mormon resources, I believe that what is in our book is an accurate representation and summary of Mormon belief on the atonement.”

He supports his contention by appealing to a few passages from LDS literature which say that because of Christ’s atonement, we are only responsible for our own sins and not Adam’s. For instance, Rhodes quotes (see p. 135) LeGrand Richards, who says that Jesus “atoned for Adam’s sin, leaving us responsible only for our own sins.” 58 But doesn’t Rhodes believe we are responsible for our personal sins?

56. Sanders, “Historical Considerations,” 77–78, emphasis added.
57. See www.geocities.com/Athens/Parthenon/2671/Rhodes.html for the entire conversation.
Otherwise, why do countercultists such as Rhodes spend so much of their time and effort announcing that everyone else is going to hell? In addition, mainstream Christians have traditionally believed that we are all responsible for Adam's sin as well, so I fail to see how the LDS view denies the efficacy of the atonement. The truth is that both evangelicals and Mormons believe we are responsible for our personal sins but that through the atonement of Christ, we can be cleansed from sin (see 2 Nephi 25:23; Omni 1:26; Mosiah 3:11; 13:28; 16:13; Alma 22:14; 24:13; 33:22; 34:8, 10–12; 36:17; 42:15; Moroni 7:26, 38; 10:26; D&C 3:20; 18:22–23; 20:29; 29:1; and Articles of Faith 3–4). This cleansing is conditioned upon individual faith, although evangelicals and Mormons may have some disagreements over what true faith entails.

How could Rhodes make such a palpably false claim? He writes, “The official Gospel Principles manual tells us that Jesus ‘became our savior and he did his part to help us return to our heavenly home. It is now up to each of us to do our part and to become worthy of exaltation’” (p. 135). And yet, if Rhodes had bothered to flip through chapter 12, “The Atonement,” in the same book, he might have noticed section headings like “Christ Was the Only One Who Could Atone for Our Sins” and “The Atonement Makes It Possible for Those Who Repent to Be Saved from Their Sins.”

Daniel Peterson recently exposed an obvious instance of plagiarism by Ron Rhodes and Marian Bodine, so I decided to spot-check a few of Rhodes's LDS sources that I happened to have on my bookshelf. While I found no obvious evidence of plagiarism in my check, I did find clear evidence that Rhodes lifted some of his quotations from other secondary anti-LDS writings without bothering to consult the original sources for accuracy or even to cite his secondary sources. For instance, he twice (supposedly) quotes Doctrine and


60. An instance of this sort of thing in Rhodes and Bodine’s book was exposed in
Covenants 93:21–23 in the following manner. "Christ, the Firstborn, was the mightiest of all the spirit children of the Father" (p. 120). A few pages later, he again claims to be quoting those verses: "the mightiest of all the spirit children of the Father" (p. 125). While he has perhaps given an adequate paraphrase of those verses, he has not even come close to a direct quotation. The same phenomenon appears in his supposed quotation of a passage from page 193 of Bruce R. McConkie’s *Mormon Doctrine* (1966 ed.). "The appointment of Jesus to be the Savior of the world was contested by one of the other sons of God. He was called Lucifer, son of the morning. Haughty, ambitious, and covetous of power and glory, this spirit-brother of Jesus desperately tried to become the Savior of mankind" (p. 120).

Now, on page 193 of *Mormon Doctrine* we do indeed find part of an article on "the Devil," and Rhodes’s "quotation" is actually a reasonable paraphrase of some of the information there. However, it is not a quotation of anything on that page, nor even in the same article, and in fact comes from a book by Milton R. Hunter. 61 Similarly, he quotes (see p. 123) Bruce R. McConkie: "Our Lord is the only mortal person ever born to a virgin, because he is the only person who ever had an immortal Father" and cites page 745 of *Mormon Doctrine* (1966 ed.). While there is an article on "Sons of God" on that page, the quotation actually comes from the "Virgin Birth" article on page 822.

I could add other examples, 62 but what makes Rhodes’s carelessness even more baffling is that in at least one instance (see p. 122) he


61. Since the book Daniel Peterson caught Rhodes and Bodine plagiarizing was Marvin W. Cowan’s *Mormon Claims Answered*, rev. ed. (Salt Lake City: Cowan, 1989), I decided to look through the online version of this book at Jerald and Sandra Tanner’s Utah Lighthouse Ministry Web site, www.utlm.org/onlinebooks/mcclaimscontents.htm. I found this exact quotation in chapter 2, in the section on Jesus Christ. However, Cowan cites Milton R. Hunter’s *Gospel through the Ages*, 15. Indeed, I found the same quotation scattered through quite a number of anti-Mormon documents, but always attributed to Milton Hunter. We may never know the exact path this quotation took to reach Rhodes, but it seems clear that there has been some judicious “borrowing” of quotations, along with some garbling en route, among the anti-Mormon community.

62. For instance, on page 123 Rhodes quotes Orson Hyde as saying that Jesus was likely married to Mary, Martha, and “the other Mary”; he gives *Journal of Discourses*, 13:259,
cites a secondary, anti-Mormon book for a quotation of an obscure LDS source, a comment by Brigham Young in an 1866 edition of the Deseret News. But the above examples are taken from sources one would find in any LDS bookstore, LDS bookshelf, or even in most public libraries! Are we to believe that Rhodes, a professional critic of the church, does not even have a copy of the Doctrine and Covenants on his bookshelf? If not, he could have looked up a copy on the Internet. And yet, in an e-mail to me Rhodes adamantly claimed, “Of course I read Robinson’s book and the other sources mentioned in our book.”

To clarify, what bothers me so much about Rhodes’s research is not that he lifted quotations from secondary sources without attribution. My problem is that those secondary sources were apparently unreliable and have given Ron Rhodes a distorted view of LDS belief. And although he may have personally consulted reliable sources—for example, the Gospel Principles manual—he evidently did so only in search of quotations to support his distorted views. Otherwise, why would Rhodes have quoted Gospel Principles in his section on “The Atonement of Jesus Christ” to support a point that directly contradicts the chapter called “The Atonement” in the same book?

Conclusion

The foregoing discussion illustrates why anti-Mormon writers like Rhodes have never gained, and will never gain, a significant audience among the Latter-day Saints. He criticizes before trying to understand and in fact makes it abundantly clear that he does not understand what he criticizes. His methods are so careless that it takes only ten minutes of flipping through readily available books to ex-

as his source. His quotation is accurate, but in fact is taken from Journal of Discourses, 4:259. Similarly, he quotes Brigham Young on page 119, citing Journal of Discourses, 13:254, but the correct reference is Journal of Discourses, 13:264. In another instance (p. 121), he cites Mosiah 4:3 as a reference for LDS beliefs about the “war in heaven,” although the passage has nothing whatever to do with the subject. Rhodes likely lifted this from a secondary source and mistook an abbreviation for Moses 4:3 (Mos. 4:3) as referring to Mosiah. Either he has been lifting quotations without checking or attributing them, or he is extremely careless about copying down references.
pose them. He reproduces many of the same arguments that have been answered over and over by the Latter-day Saints and acts as if there can be no counterarguments. In short, he thinks we are so amazingly dense as to believe in a system of theology that can be brought tumbling down by a few biblical proof texts and quotations lifted from other such countercult literary gems.

This also serves to illustrate why Latter-day Saints have received *How Wide the Divide?* so well. It is not that we all agree with everything Stephen Robinson said or that we think he “won” the debate with Craig Blomberg. We have simply been starving for some resource that can serve as a catalyst for meaningful conversations with our evangelical neighbors. We are tired of having to clear up dozens of bizarre misconceptions (like Rhodes’s version of the LDS atonement) at the outset of every single conversation with these people. In addition, I believe the book has done quite a bit to clear up several misconceptions Mormons typically have about evangelicals.

As I stated in my introduction, Rhodes’s chapter does have some redeeming features in that he produces a few cogent arguments for the evangelical position that were not stated by Craig Blomberg. Therefore, although not very useful for the Latter-day Saint, this work is not completely worthless.