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David L. Paulsen

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Author(s) David L. Paulsen

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Abstract Review of *The New Mormon Challenge: Responding to the Latest Defenses of a Fast-Growing Movement* (2002), edited by Francis J. Beckwith, Carl Mosser, and Paul Owens.

A General Response to *The New Mormon Challenge*

David L. Paulsen

Carl Mosser asked me to provide a general Latter-day Saint response to *The New Mormon Challenge* and, in particular, to respond to the authors' conclusion that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is not a Christian church. With our limited time, I cannot do justice to even one of these invitations. Rather than slighting the second, which is personally very important to me, I have chosen to defer it to another venue.

General Reaction

My general response will consist of summarizing the authors' own stated aims for their work and then assessing how well, from my Latter-day Saint perspective, they have achieved them. These aims include the following:

This paper in its original form was presented as part of a panel discussion of *The New Mormon Challenge* conducted before the Evangelical Philosophical Society section of the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) in Denver, Colorado, 17 November 2001. Richard J. Mouw, president of California's Fuller Theological Seminary, moderated the discussion. Latter-day Saint respondents included David L. Paulsen, Daniel C. Peterson, Stephen D. Ricks, Blake T. Ostler, and Hollis R. Johnson. Representing the evangelical viewpoint were William Lane Craig, Francis J. Beckwith, Carl Mosser, Paul

Review of Francis J. Beckwith, Carl Mosser, and Paul Owen, eds. *The New Mormon Challenge: Responding to the Latest Defenses of a Fast-Growing Movement.* Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2002. 535 pp., with glossary and indexes. $21.99.

1. To retard the growth and progress of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints by disproving or otherwise discrediting its beliefs.[1] (Given this aim, I would classify *The New Mormon Challenge* as an anti-Mormon book.)

2. To this end, based on sound scholarship, to provide a rigorous critique of Latter-day Saint beliefs.[2]

3. As a basis for this critique, to first state Latter-day Saint beliefs accurately and fairly.[3]

4. To this end, to distinguish between "official" or "canonized" beliefs, traditional beliefs, popular or commonly held beliefs, and, finally, permissible beliefs.[4]

5. To present this critique in a "respectful, charitable and courteous" manner.[5]

6. To engage Latter-day Saints in genuine and "fruitful theological dialogue."[6]

With the exception of the first, these goals are refreshing. It is rare, indeed, that an anti-Mormon book has such laudable aspirations. I thank the authors. How well does *The New Mormon Challenge* achieve these aims? Leaving aside the first aim and grading the book by comparing it with other anti-Mormon books, I would score it near the top of the class, significantly better than most anti-Mormon books. Again, my thanks.

However, if I were to grade the book against more absolute standards, I would mark out improvements that still need to be made.

Owen, and Paul Copan. All citations to *The New Mormon Challenge* in my panel presentation are to a prepublication version of the manuscript (hereafter, PPM). Corresponding citations in this written presentation are to the published version (NMC), which was not yet available at the time of the Denver event. Marc-Charles Ingerson and David Vanderbeek have provided valuable assistance in preparing this manuscript for publication.

1. PPM, 77–79; see NMC, 68–69.
2. PPM, 21–22; see NMC, 22–23.
3. PPM, 21; see NMC, 22.
4. PPM, 21–22; see NMC, 22.
5. PPM, 20; see NMC, 11, 21.
6. PPM, 98; see NMC, 12–13, 86.

And I am hopeful that these will be made in the authors' intended sequels. Perhaps some candid comments will conduce to that end.

Aim 1: To retard the growth and progress of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints by disproving or otherwise discrediting its beliefs.

I will not say much by way of critique of this aim. *Res ipsa loquitur*—the thing speaks for itself. Further, this aim seems strikingly at odds with the book's additional goal of engaging Latter-day Saints in genuine and fruitful dialogue. How do a declaration and pursuit of all-out war on another's faith generate goodwill and genuine dialogue? Nonetheless, I personally hope that this warfare doesn't diminish dialogue between our two Christian communities, which, I hope, continues and flourishes.

Aim 2: To this end, based on sound scholarship, to provide a rigorous critique of Latter-day Saint beliefs.

I am a philosopher, so I will leave it to my colleagues to evaluate the soundness of the book's scholarship. But, by and large, I am impressed with the quality of the critiques collected in this book. Contributors have posed challenges to Latter-day Saint positions that will likely keep LDS apologists engaged for some time. I do, however, want to raise a metalevel question relating to Aim 2. In context, what does "sound scholarship" require? Consider two major points argued for in the book: (1) the Bible teaches that the world was created out of nothing, and (2) the Bible teaches that God is a single metaphysical substance consisting of three persons. Each of these claims, I understand, flies directly in the face of a scholarly consensus to the contrary. Of course, this fact in no way entails that these claims are false or, by itself, impugns the scholarly nature of the arguments marshaled in their support. But, given a contrary scholarly consensus, does "sound scholarship" require that defenders of a minority position (1) acknowledge the contrary consensus, (2) at least summarize the grounds on which such consensus is based, and (3) only then make a case for their minority report? Failing to do this, defenders of a minority

position may mislead their readers to conclude that the scholarly consensus supports their view when in fact it does not. Again, what does a critique of LDS beliefs based on "sound scholarship" require?

Aim 3: As a basis for this critique, to first state Latter-day Saint beliefs accurately and fairly.

To fulfill this aim, it seems to me that evangelicals must state our beliefs to our satisfaction. And here we arrive at what I consider to be a major failing in *The New Mormon Challenge.* While I find in this book some misstatements of Latter-day Saint beliefs, the primary sin of the editors of *The New Mormon Challenge* is not so much one of commission as it is of omission. The editors, as they themselves acknowledge, fail to set out our basic beliefs.[7] Especially troubling here is their failure to set out our views of Christology, soteriology, and the doctrine of the Trinity, while nonetheless attempting to convince their readers that our faith cannot be considered Christian in "any very useful or theologically significant sense."[8] Strange that these nonpresented beliefs should have no theological bearing on whether our faith is Christian. And stranger still that our rejection of two extrabiblical beliefs—creation out of nothing and the classical doctrine of the Trinity—should be theologically decisive for excluding Latter-day Saints from the Christian circle.[9]

Compounding this failing to set out our beliefs is the authors' proposed remedy. They recommend that their readers fill this information gap by reading another book by evangelicals about Latter-day

7. Speaking of the beginning chapters of their book, the editors acknowledge, "Neither, however, gives an introductory overview of LDS history and belief. For that we heartily recommend another book which will serve as an excellent companion to this one: Richard and Joan Ostling's *Mormon America: The Power and the Promise.* PPM, 19; see NMC, 20. See Louis Midgley's review of the Ostling book, "Faulty Topography," in this volume, pp. 139–92, and Raymond Takashi Swenson's review, "Faith without Caricature?" *FARMS Review of Books* 13/2 (2001): 65–77.

8. PPM, 76; see NMC, 66.

9. The editors describe these beliefs as "absolutely fundamental and nonnegotiable. We do not feel that the status of Mormonism in relation to Christianity can ever change unless there is a willingness within the structures of the LDS Church to reconsider those issues." PPM, 476; see NMC, 400.

Saints that, on its flyleaf, promises to provide everything anyone ever wanted to know about the Mormons: *Mormon America: The Power and the Promise,* by Richard and Joan Ostling.[10] They even call this book "an excellent companion" to their own.[11]

I have two bones to pick here. First, why *Mormon America?* It is laden with errors of all kinds, both major and minor.[12] It is also often biased in its depiction of Latter-day Saint history and contemporary Mormon culture.[13] If the editors choose to incorporate by reference its portrayal of LDS beliefs and practice into *The New Mormon Challenge,* they do so at the price of defeating their goal to state LDS beliefs fairly and accurately, perhaps even at the price of dissuading informed Latter-day Saints from taking their book seriously.

My second bone is more fundamental. If the editors of *The New Mormon Challenge* really want their readers to understand what

10. Richard N. Ostling and Joan K. Ostling, *Mormon America: The Power and the Promise* (San Francisco: Harper, 1999).

11. PPM, 19; see NMC, 20.

12. See Ostling and Ostling, *Mormon America.* The errors are too numerous to treat in a footnote. Examples of the minor errors include the Ostlings' implication that Latter-day Saints cannot obtain a temple recommend if they drink caffeinated soda (ibid., 176) and that we hold testimony meetings every Sunday, rather than only the first Sunday of each month (ibid., 181). More serious flaws include their claims that the church does "little to accommodate the philosophical cast of mind" and intellectuals in general (ibid., 374) and that "Mormon teaching violates the basis of ecumenical fellowship. The LDS scriptures simply do not allow Mormons to view the others as legitimate churches" (ibid., 323); "support for the Mormon doctrines of a corporeal . . . God . . . cannot be found . . . in the early church fathers" (ibid., 313). For a very different take on the latter issue, see Carl W. Griffin and David L. Paulsen, "Augustine and the Corporeality of God," *Harvard Theological Review* 95/1 (2002): 97–118; Paulsen "Early Christian Belief in a Corporeal Deity: Origen and Augustine as Reluctant Witnesses," *Harvard Theological Review* 83/2 (1990): 105–16; "Reply to Kim Paffenroth's Comment," *Harvard Theological Review* 86/2 (1993): 235–39. They also assert that Joseph Smith revised his account of the first vision to adapt it to his later teachings (Ostling and Ostling, *Mormon America,* 305–6); see Ari D. Bruening and David L. Paulsen, "The Development of the Mormon Understanding of God: Early Mormon Modalism and Other Myths," *FARMS Review of Books* 13/2 (2001): 109–69.

13. As an example, the Ostlings refer to the church as "an authoritarian and secretive church" (*Mormon America,* 374) that "operates more like a small cult than a major denomination" (ibid., 354). It is interesting to note that the Ostlings, previous to *their* claiming that the church operates like a small cult, acknowledged that the term "cult" is

Latter-day Saints believe, why not let us tell our own story? Why not refer readers to books about LDS doctrine written by Latter-day Saints for Latter-day Saints? Let me make a positive suggestion here: Why not encourage them to read *Jesus the Christ* or *The Articles of Faith,* both by the late Apostle James E. Talmage?[14] In *Jesus the Christ* Elder Talmage explains our understanding of the divine nature, life, and redemptive mission of Jesus Christ. In *The Articles of Faith* he clearly explains our thirteen Articles of Faith. (Let me add here that our first article of faith proclaims: "We believe in God, the Eternal Father, and in His Son, Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Ghost." In explaining this article, Talmage consistently uses the term *trinity* to describe God and sets out, as our own self-understanding of God, what is clearly a social trinitarian view of the Godhead.[15] By way of contrast, the Ostlings, as outsiders, inform their readers that Latter-day Saints are henotheists.)

Jesus the Christ and *The Articles of Faith* were published nearly a century ago, were both commissioned by the First Presidency of the church, and for decades were published under the imprimatur of the Corporation of the First Presidency. After nearly a hundred years, they remain among the few books that church missionaries are authorized to take with them on their missions. While not inerrant, these books provide a much more accurate description of our beliefs than does any book describing our beliefs written by someone outside our faith, let alone the highly unreliable *Mormon America.* The editors should consider recommending *Jesus the Christ* and *The Articles of Faith* to their readers.[16]

the "slippery and all-purpose slur aimed at marginal faiths" (ibid., xx). Whatever the Ostlings personally think of Latter-day Saints, does their book provide, as the editors claim, a fair and objective "overview of LDS history and belief" (PPM, 19; see NMC, 20)? Not even close.

14. James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983), and James E. Talmage, *A Study of the Articles of Faith: Being a Consideration of the Principal Doctrines of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1958).

15. Talmage, *The Articles of Faith,* 29, 39–42, 47–48.

16. The editors disregarded this suggestion and continued to recommend *Mormon America* in their published version.

Aim 4: To this end, to distinguish between "official" or "canonized" beliefs, traditional beliefs, popular or commonly held beliefs, and, finally, permissible beliefs.

Since the authors provide almost no exposition of Latter-day Saint beliefs, I did not attempt to assess the authors' performance with respect to this aim. While the Ostling book sometimes provides differing formulations of LDS beliefs, it largely fails to make the aimed-for distinctions.

Aim 5: To present this critique in a "respectful, charitable and courteous" manner.

I deeply appreciate the editors' intent to fulfill this aim. And I believe they are sincere. In light of this, I must confess I was mystified to discover that in *The New Mormon Challenge,* my beliefs and my church are referred to by terms such as: "parasite,"[17] "pagan,"[18] "cult,"[19] "pitiable," "worse than scientific poppycock," "a fairy tale."[20] Somehow, these epithets fail to strike me as courteous, respectful, or charitable. Given their stated aim, I ask the editors to help me understand why these disparaging descriptions of my faith are in their book. Let me illustrate the object of my concern here by reading a longer passage in the manuscript:

> Almost all converts to Mormonism come from a nominally Christian background. . . . Mormon missionaries don't

17. "I am skeptical that evangelicalism is growing in the right kind of way to stave off *parasite* groups like Mormonism." PPM, 77; see NMC, 67, for revised version.

18. "The historic LDS view of God virtually matches this *pagan* idea of deity whereas the God of the Old Testament is radically different." PPM, 220; see NMC, 187, for revision.

19. "Latter-day Saints, unlike the members of most other New Religious Movements or '*cults*,' have begun to enter the academy and produce genuine works of scholarship." "Paul Carden observes that 'few Christians in the field of missions seem to recognize the multi-faceted threat of the *cults* around the globe. . . .' With respect to Mormonism specifically," "Mormonism stands out from other New Religious Movements and *cults* in its attitude toward higher education and scholarship." PPM, 68, 77, 81, emphasis added in all quotations; see NMC, 60, 67, 71. See Mosser's discussion of Mormonism being a cult. PPM, 495–96 n. cxv; see NMC, 410–11 n. 1.

20. "The idea that there has been an eternal progression of humanoid deities consorting with one another is *worse than scientific poppycock*—it is *a fairy tale* of Olympian proportions." The next paragraph refers to the Latter-day Saint God as "a *pitiable* deity, indeed!" PPM, 171, emphasis added; see NMC, 147.

> evangelize, they proselytize. Mormonism is a parasite religion that gets its life from preexisting forms of Christianity. . . . If allowed to progress unchecked, Mormonism's growth will have a significant adverse effect on evangelical growth. In the animal world large parasites eventually cripple the health of their hosts. Sometimes they even cause their death. If evangelicals shrug off predictions of tremendous growth for a parasite religion like Mormonism, they do so at risk to the health of evangelicalism. . . . It is clear to me that the current evangelical response to Mormonism does not significantly retard the spread and growth of the LDS faith. We must somehow bring about . . . "a change in the process."[21]

What follows this passage, it seems to me, is a vigorous call to arms to all sectors of the evangelical community to do whatever it takes to retard the spread and growth of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Academics, clergy, and laymen are all urged to enlist. *The New Mormon Challenge* then is presented as an arsenal of weapons to be used, both defensively and offensively, in the campaign to impede the growth and progress of the Church of Jesus Christ. Does this response show Latter-day Saints and their beliefs "respect?" Perhaps, but if so, this seems to me like the kind of respect one shows for a feared and threatening enemy. This is certainly not the kind of respect I have for my evangelical friends. I respect them as valued allies standing together with me in the cause of Christ against his real enemies.

Aim 6: To engage Latter-day Saints in genuine and "fruitful theological dialogue."

21. PPM, 77–79; see NMC, 67–69, for the white-washed version: "Almost all converts to Mormonism come from a nominally Christian background. . . . Mormon missionaries don't evangelize, they proselytize. Mormonism is [a] religion that gets its life mostly from preexisting forms of Christianity. . . . If evangelicals shrug off predictions of tremendous growth for a religion like Mormonism, they do so at risk to the health of evangelicalism. . . . It is clear to me that the current evangelical response to Mormonism . . . does not significantly retard the spread and growth of the LDS faith. . . . We must somehow bring about . . . 'a change in the process.'"

Hallelujah! I hope *The New Mormon Challenge* helps to bring about this end. But I have already noted some serious tensions in the several aims of the book. For instance, on the one hand, the book is a call to arms to evangelicals and other Christians to join in impeding the growth and progress of my faith, proffering its essays as weapons with which the warfare can be waged. At the same time, the volume is proffered as an olive leaf beckoning "fruitful" Latter-day Saint–evangelical dialogue. Something does not quite add up here. My puzzlement connects with another important sense of "respect." It seems to me that truly genuine and fruitful interfaith dialogue necessarily requires some notion of reciprocity in the sense that all of the participants are open at least to the possibility of learning something from the other. I believe that Latter-day Saints generally are open to that possibility. Indeed, as a prologue to their book, the authors quote the following statement from Joseph Smith: "One of the grand fundamental principles of 'Mormonism' is to receive truth, let it come from whence it may" (PPM, 7). Latter-day Saint Christians take this statement of the Prophet seriously. We do seek truth, whatever its source. In particular, I believe there is much that we LDS Christians can learn from evangelical Christians. For instance, evangelical thinkers have been reflecting carefully and deeply for generations on many questions of Christian theology, especially soteriology. They surely have much to teach Latter-day Saints here. Personally, I believe I have already learned and will continue to learn much from them about grace. One particular sentence from Craig Blomberg's contribution to *How Wide the Divide?* for example, moved me profoundly: "Salvation is absolutely free, but it will cost us our very lives."[22]

On the other hand, I do not get the impression from reading *The New Mormon Challenge* that the editors and contributors are even open to the *possibility* of learning anything from us, especially pertaining to Christian doctrine or theology. I ask them to tell me

22. Craig L. Blomberg and Stephen E. Robinson, *How Wide the Divide? A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation* (Downer's Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1997), 169.

honestly if my impression is correct. If so, I hope they will help me understand how they expect *The New Mormon Challenge* to generate fruitful dialogue. What is their definition of "fruitful?" Exactly what kind of "fruit" are they hoping to harvest?

Addendum

In this addendum, I have outlined some of the significant changes made to the prepublication manuscript prior to the book's going to press. Most of these changes were attempts to address panelists' concerns about Aims 1 and 5. The editors were distressed by my characterization of their book as anti-Mormon. My principal reason for doing so was their call for collective Christian action (Aim 1) to retard the growth and progress of the church, as explicitly set out in Mosser's essay "And the Saints Go Marching On." Mosser tried to make it clear in the published version of his essay that he was not calling for collective action to impede the church's growth *simpliciter* but only to prevent the church's growth when it is at the expense of Christian churches. This qualification, for me, hardly changes the anti-Mormon nature of Aim 1.

With respect to Aim 5, Mosser made some significant revisions to the disparaging rhetoric contained in his own essay but largely left the rest of the derogatory language unchanged. I quote at length a recent e-mail post from Mosser detailing these changes.[23]

> As I recall, most of your concerns were related to comments in my chapter. So, at the end of the email I have excerpted from the lists of corrections/changes the sections pertaining to my chapter.
>
> A number of changes made before AAR proleptically dealt with concerns the panel raised. The changes made after AAR were mostly corrections of new errors that had entered the text, mistakes that we had previously missed, and for-

23. Carl Mosser to David Paulsen, 9 August 2002, e-mail entitled "Re: Fwd: changes to pre-publication ms. of TNMC."

> matting issues. But there were also a handful of changes and small additions made in light of the panel's comments. . . . There were a couple of issues I would have liked to have addressed in light of our discussion (e.g., what constitutes "anti-Mormonism"), perhaps in the form of a short appendix or an additional section to my chapter, but that just wasn't possible.

Changes that Mosser submitted to the publisher before AAR include replacing the word "cults" with the term "New Religious Movements,"[24] altering the phrase "gets its life from" to "gets its life mostly from" in connection with the term "parasite" as a reference to the church.[25] His deletions include removing the term "cults" as an inclusive reference for the church,[26] the words "parasite"[27] and "parasitical"[28] with reference to the church, and the sentence, "In the animal world large parasites eventually cripple the health of their hosts."[29] Mosser adds that in one instance, "I used the word [parasite] because I wanted the evangelical missiological community to clearly get the point I was making and did not intend to imply anything pejorative. In rereading the essay I see that Mormons would take this in a very different way." In light of this consideration, and probably others, Mosser elected to delete all occurrences of the term "parasite."

After the AAR a few additional changes were submitted to the publisher. One modification was inserting the qualification "defined theologically" after the word "cult" in the sentence containing "however, *cult* is the only word . . ."[30]

Mosser omitted the sentences: "If allowed to progress unchecked, Mormonism's growth will have a significant adverse effect on evangelical growth. In the animal world large parasites eventually cripple the health of their hosts. Sometimes they even cause their death."[31]

24. PPM, 496 n. cxvii; see NMC, 411 n. 2.
25. PPM, 78; see NMC, 68.
26. PPM, 81; see NMC, 71.
27. PPM, 77, 78; see NMC, 67, 68.
28. PPM, 96; see NMC, 83.
29. PPM, 78.
30. PPM, 496 n. cxvi; see NMC, 411 n. 1.
31. PPM, 78; see NMC, 68.

With respect to the problematic first full paragraph (PPM, 79; NMC 69), Mosser explained,

> The LDS respondents at AAR took particular offense at this paragraph and labeled the book "anti-Mormon" because of it. Therefore, there are a few changes I would like to make to it. Since a few lines are deleted on the previous page, the length of these additions should balance out pretty well. First, change the first sentence to: "It is clear to me that the current evangelical response to Mormonism (and to New Religious Movements generally) does not significantly retard the spread and growth of the lds [*sic*] faith (and other NRMs) at the expense of orthodox Christianity." The last phrase will be slightly repetitive with the phrase "at our expense" used later in the paragraph, but that is by intention. I want this point to be emphasized. Second, after the sentence ending ". . . on which its current growth rests," insert the following sentences: "I am convinced that a major factor contributing to Mormon growth is the widespread biblical and theological illiteracy among the laity of Protestant and Catholic churches. People in our churches need to be grounded better in basic biblical doctrine. We should also investigate other factors that contribute to lds growth and redress those that are due to failings within the Christian community." Third, replace "counter-cult" with "apologetics." Fourth, in the last sentence insert "(and other NRMs)" after "Mormonism." The entire revised paragraph should read:
>
> "It is clear to me that the current evangelical response to Mormonism (and to New Religious Movements generally) does not significantly retard the spread and growth of the lds faith (and other NRMs) at the expense of orthodox Christianity. We must somehow bring about what Stark calls 'a change in the process' if we want to prevent Mormonism from becoming one of the largest worldwide faiths at our expense. Something will have to shift the basis on which its

> current growth rests. I am convinced that a major factor contributing to Mormon growth is the widespread biblical and theological illiteracy among the laity of Protestant and Catholic churches. People in our churches need to be grounded better in basic biblical doctrine. We should also investigate other factors that contribute to lds growth and redress those that are due to failings within the Christian community. This cannot be accomplished by leaving the task solely up to the numerous small and financially strapped apologetics ministries. Nor are the vast majority of those engaged in such ministry equipped to do all that needs to be done, even if finances and personnel were not so limited. A proper response to Mormonism (and other NRMs) will require the entire evangelical community."

Though the above changes are laudable, my original analysis (like much of the language and focus of the book) remains fundamentally unchanged. In my judgment, the book remains anti-Mormon for two reasons: (1) their call, albeit now qualified, for collective action to retard the growth and progress of the church; and (2) their failure (refusal?) to state Latter-day Saint beliefs in LDS terms or to refer their readers to LDS explanations of our beliefs—e.g., the recommended *Jesus the Christ* and *The Articles of Faith.* As a result, their readers are left with the Ostlings' biased (sometimes scurrilous) slants on Latter-day Saint doctrine and history or, even worse, with characterizations of that doctrine like Craig's "infinite progression of humanoid deities consorting with one another from eternity."[32]

32. NMC, 147.