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Abstract Review of *Exploring Mormon Thought: The Attributes of God* (2001), and *Exploring Mormon Thought: The Problems of Theism and the Love of God* (2006), by Blake T. Ostler.

Blake Ostler's Mormon Theology

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I will review some themes in the first two volumes of a projected four-volume work on Mormon theology by Blake Ostler. Since my engagement will inevitably raise questions about the organization and arguments of Ostler's work, let me state my overall assessment of his project at the outset. These books are the most important works on Mormon theology ever written. There is nothing currently available that is even close to the rigor and sophistication of these volumes. B. H. Roberts and John A. Widtsoe may have had interesting insights in the early part of the twentieth century,[1] but they had neither the temperament nor the training to give a rigorous defense of their views in dialogue with a wider stream of Christian theology. Sterling McMurrin and Truman Madsen had the capacity to engage Mormon

1. B. H. Roberts, *The Mormon Doctrine of Deity* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1903); B. H. Roberts, *The Seventy's Course in Theology* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1907); B. H. Roberts, *The Way, The Truth, The Life* (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 1994); John A. Widtsoe, *Rational Theology* (Salt Lake City: General Priesthood Committee, 1915).

Review of Blake T. Ostler. *Exploring Mormon Thought: The Attributes of God*. Salt Lake City: Kofford Books, 2001. xvi + 526 pp., with bibliography, subject and scripture indexes. $29.95; and Blake T. Ostler. *Exploring Mormon Thought: The Problems of Theism and the Love of God*. Salt Lake City: Kofford Books, 2006. xi + 503 pp., with bibliography, subject and scripture indexes. $34.95.

theology at this level, but neither one did.[2] They were both better at broad, sweeping generalizations and comparisons than they were at rigorous detailed analysis. Ostler's work brings together the rigor of current work in philosophy of religion in the Anglo-American tradition, a rich knowledge of major Christian thinkers like St. Augustine (354–430), Thomas Aquinas (1225–74), and John Calvin (1509–64), as well as a deep commitment to Mormonism. Nothing of this depth and obvious faith has ever been attempted before.

I

At the beginning of his Reformation masterpiece *Institutes of the Christian Religion,* Calvin claimed that "nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves."[3] Whether all theologians, Mormon or otherwise, have followed this advice may be debated, but these seem to me to be the two pillars of Ostler's theology. His theological position is centered on (1) a strong view of human freedom and (2) a view of God as a being of love and compassion who invites us to use our freedom to establish a truly loving relationship with him.

At the outset Ostler wisely avoids two errors that plague Mormon theological writing. First, he explicitly recognizes that his view of Mormon theology is not the only one in the published literature. At times he directly criticizes other Latter-day Saint authors whose views he finds confused, contradictory, or morally indefensible.[4] He also makes clear his admiration for the views of John A. Widtsoe and B. H. Roberts. Second, Ostler does not merely assert or stipulate what

2. Sterling M. McMurrin, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* (1965; repr., Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2000); Truman G. Madsen, *Eternal Man* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1966). See the review of McMurrin's book by Ted Vaggalis in this number of the *FARMS Review,* pages 265–90.

3. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion,* ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford L. Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967), 1:35.

4. He specifically rejects what he calls "neo-absolutist" Mormonism (1:98–100). He sees signs of this in the writings of Bruce R. McConkie and Orson Pratt, both of whom advocated a view of God in a timeless realm called "eternity." McConkie, for example, specifically rejected the eternal man thesis.

Mormon doctrine is or must be. He argues for his views. He does not, as many do, assume that his views are correct without argument.

Ostler's view of human freedom is at the core of his work. Though his discussion of human freedom does not appear until the middle of the second volume, I believe that it is one of the two keys to his entire theological project. He is a strong proponent of what philosophers and theologians now tend to call a "libertarian" concept of free will (or what the Saints tend to call free agency). This position holds that persons are free if and only if "they can do otherwise given all the circumstances that obtain in the moment of free decision" (1:206). In order to be free it must be the case that I could have done otherwise than I did in a situation of choice.

On a whole range of philosophical problems—such as skepticism, the existence of an external world, or moral convictions—one will reach a point where no further argument can be given. For example, as the late eminent moral philosopher John Rawls (1921–2002) said, if we do not know that slavery is wrong, moral philosophy can go no further. For Ostler, human freedom is one such case. At times the only relevant answer to the question of "why did John steal a car?" is simply "he chose to." To be brief: sometimes it is up to me what I do next. What I do is not determined by either external forces or internal mental states.

Ostler's libertarianism is supported by three lines of argument. First, he believes, correctly in my view, that libertarian notions of moral agency are "presupposed throughout the Mormon scripture" (1:242 n. 7). Persons are regarded as at least sometimes having the power to do otherwise than they chose to do. Second, he argues that only a libertarian understanding of agency can preserve a robust notion of individual free will that we know by examining our own lives and our most basic understanding of moral responsibility. Third, he adopts the view of "eternal man" as explicated by Truman Madsen, that human beings are partially uncreated causes of their own actions, a metaphysic that makes us as individuals ultimately responsible for our own moral lives and for choices leading to a loving relationship with God (1:201–46).

In taking this strong view of moral agency, or freedom, Ostler is in dialogue with a number of recent thinkers who have revived the notion of libertarian agency from the nearly defunct status to which many philosophers had consigned it. In doing so Ostler has placed himself at odds with what we might call the mainstream views in both theology and philosophy. The mainstream view is known as "compatibilism." Compatibilism holds that we can accept both causal determinism of all events (including human acts) and human freedom. They defend this position by holding that one is only "unfree" in performing an act if one is coerced or forced to perform the act by forces external to one's self. One may be held to be free, however, if the cause of one's acts is one's own internal mental state. Thus my actions can be both free and caused by my mental state. Hence, causal determinism and human freedom can be held concurrently.[5]

A textbook example of this view comes from one of its most eminent progenitors, John Locke, who posits a case in which a person is taken while asleep and placed in a room with someone whom he has been longing to see and converse with. When he awakes, he engages in an animated discussion with the friend. All the while the door is locked. The person could not get out even if he wanted to. Locke claims that this person is acting freely because he is doing what he wants.[6]

Libertarians like Ostler regard this as an unpersuasive rhetorical sleight of hand. It is not real freedom if you cannot do otherwise. If a chain of causality that leads to our mental state combined with the relevant physical laws can explain our acts, then it would seem that our acts are caused by something other than our choice. Ostler's defense of libertarian agency is crucial because compatibilism in its

5. For a short introduction to libertarianism, see Richard Taylor, *Metaphysics,* 4th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1991); for a vigorous and technical defense, see Peter van Inwagen, *An Essay on Free Will* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); and for a comprehensive overview of free-will issues, see Robert Kane, ed., *Oxford Handbook of Free Will* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

6. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), ed. Peter H. Nidditch (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), 238. Some Mormon authors have adopted compatibilism. See L. Rex Sears, "Determinist Mansions in the Mormon House?" *Dialogue* 31/4 (1998): 115–41; and Kent E. Robson, "The Foundations of Freedom in Mormon Thought," *Sunstone,* September/October 1982, 51–54.

many nuanced forms has been a backbone of various versions of theological determinism: the idea that all acts we do are already predetermined by God. If I do what I desire and God created both me and my desires, then I am determined by God and yet still free. Ostler, correctly in my view, holds that divine predetermination of our acts before we make them is simply not a plausible or acceptable view for Latter-day Saints.

Ostler's rejection of compatibilism is crucial to his view of God. If libertarianism is correct, then no one, not even God, can know exactly what I will do with my freedom in the future until I make those choices. Libertarianism preserves real agency. To adopt this position forces us to rethink commonly held assumptions about God. Ostler engages in such rethinking. He believes that much of what has been said about God in the Christian past is simply wrong and also unscriptural and that those Latter-day Saint writers who have been enamored of more traditional Christian theologies have brought these same errors along with them. He believes, of course, that God knows all that can be known. Hence, God is omniscient. But he cannot know, at least in precise detail, what actions free agents will perform in the future. If God can know today that John will steal a car tomorrow, then it is true today that John will steal a car tomorrow. This is determinism, and it follows from the belief that God can know for certain whether or not John will steal the car tomorrow (1:137–86, 295–330).

To preserve moral agency and responsibility as taught in scripture, Ostler accepts the currently widely discussed view called "present omniscience." God knows everything that is true at every present moment. If freedom is real, however, he cannot have future omniscience—that is, he cannot know the future contingent acts of free agents. Ostler argues in rigorous detail that none of the ways in which philosophers have sought to reconcile absolute divine foreknowledge and human freedom are sound. The traditional timeless God of Boethius (480–524) and much of the Christian tradition cannot be an agent in time as ancient and modern revelation clearly show him to be. Nor is the currently fashionable Molinism (named after the Spanish Jesuit Luis de Molina [1535–1600], who thought it up) ultimately any

better. On Molina's view God's foreknowledge is the result of knowing what any free creature will do in any particular circumstance. God knows that John will steal the car in circumstances C. If the circumstances change God knows what John will do then as well. The issues are highly technical, but Ostler does a masterful job in explaining them and showing that Molinism ultimately requires God to know what a person would do if placed in any certain set of circumstances.[7] The only way this can be held is to assume that I have no freedom to surprise God. When the Lord tells Abraham, after the near sacrifice of Isaac, "now I know that thou fearest God" (Genesis 22:12), it must, on a Molinist or compatibilist view, be either a mistranslation or a condescension to our limited perspective.[8] According to the Christian tradition it cannot be a real gain in divine knowledge.

Ostler puts the matter in contemporary terms by posing the question regarding which of two worldviews is correct. Is it the picture given in the classic movie *It's a Wonderful Life,* where Clarence the angel can show George Bailey just how different Bedford Falls would have been without him? Or is the best view the one painted in Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*? At the key point Scrooge pleads, "Spirit! hear me! I am not the man I was. I will not be the man I must have been but for this intercourse. Why show me this, if I am past all hope?"[9] With elegance and precision Ostler shows that human freedom, the moral and devotional life, and revelation ancient and modern all demonstrate that Dickens is right and Frank Capra is wrong (1:164–65).

Ostler's picture of God's knowledge is deeply interconnected with the scriptural picture of God as distinct and different from that portrait as given in the Christian theological tradition (often called clas-

7. Luis de Molina, *On Divine Foreknowledge (Part IV of the Concordia),* introduction, translation, and notes by Alfred J. Freddoso (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988); for a very competent version of Molinism in contemporary terms, see William Lane Craig, *Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom* (Leiden: Brill, 1991).

8. Ostler is very much in sympathy with what is known as "open theism" in contemporary evangelical thought. Open theists argue that the future is open because free agents have not yet completed it. See especially John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Divine Providence* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998), and the substantial literature he cites.

9. Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol* (New York: Macmillan, 1950), 125.

sical theism). At the heart of this difference are the concepts of divine immutability and impassability. Immutability implies that God cannot change since he is already perfect and real change would involve moving from a state of perfection to some other state. Impassability means simply that God has no emotions. Put these two concepts together and you have a picture of a God who cannot change his mind, cannot learn new things about his children through seeing their acts or hearing their prayers, and cannot feel sorry, sad, happy, or loving toward his children. If this passionless, changeless being does not sound consistent with the scriptures to Latter-day Saints, that is because it is not, at least not according to Ostler (1:365–408), and I agree.

Divine passability—that is, having emotions—is an excellent example of how concepts of human nature and of God are deeply connected in Ostler's thought. Consider God feeling angry or sad over the sins of human beings, such as David's sin with Bathsheba (2 Samuel 12:1–14). Does such anger make any sense if God already knew beforehand what David would do? Does such anger and the subsequent divine punishment resulting from such anger make sense if David could not have done otherwise? The scriptural witness of God's emotions is perhaps the best ground we have for rejecting complete divine foreknowledge and accepting a libertarian notion of moral agency in which a person can do otherwise than he has done or is doing. On a libertarian notion of agency God can be surprised and thus actually feel sad or happy. The fact that the scriptures portray God as feeling emotions, and humans as morally responsible, is the best ground on which we can only assert present omniscience, while also accepting libertarian agency.

Consider in this regard perhaps the most telling religious practice of all, private prayer. There are many reasons to engage in public religious actions: appearing righteous to others, seeing friends, showing off, and so forth. Private prayer is different. In private prayer we thank God for his blessings and ask for comfort, guidance, and intervention; "lead me, guide me, walk beside me" are the keys of what we ask for in prayer.[10] But would this make any sense if God already knew what was going to happen or if he could not be moved (was immutable) by our

10. See "I Am a Child of God," *Hymns,* no. 301.

sincere petition? (2:25–75).[11] The plain answer is no. We would have no reason to bother with asking God for help if our asking with faith would make no difference. According to the traditional view of God, the central challenge of the restoration—that is, the story of Moroni and the Book of Mormon—would make no sense (see Moroni 10:4).

By rejecting the classical picture of God as existing in a timeless realm called "eternity" with a set of attributes like classical omniscience, immutability, and impassability, Ostler believes that Mormonism can untie the Gordian knot of Christology that has plagued traditional theology for two millennia. As a theological discipline, Christology addresses the problem of how we can explain and hold together Jesus as both divine and human. Suppose one holds with traditional theologies that God is, in his essence, fundamentally different from human beings. If he exists in a level of being that is utterly different from us, then the problem of how one person, Jesus, can be both God and man is difficult to comprehend. But it is less of a mystery if we reject the two-natures ontology that underlies it. If God is at some fundamental level like us, then Christ's humanity is less of a mystery because it is something like our potential divinity. God and man are not as different as classical Christologies have supposed (1:409–50).[12]

Furthermore, classical theology has difficulty explaining why God came down to the human level and allowed himself to go through what Jesus went through. If God is immutable, then he is unchangeable. But Jesus clearly went through changes. He was angry, tired, happy, and sad, and he ate food. These are points that are reinforced in modern revelation. Furthermore, if God is impassable, then he has no emotions like love and no need to enter into a relationship

11. Ostler argues that those who try to view petitionary prayer in the context of classical foreknowledge must resort to some form of divine manipulation of humans. See Paul Helm, "Prayer and Providence," in *Christian Faith and Philosophical Theology,* ed. Gijsbert van den Brink, Luco J. van den Brom, and Marcel Sarot (Kampen, Neth.: Kok Pharos, 1992), 103–15; and Terrance Tiessen, *Providence and Prayer: How Does God Work in the World?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000); the classical discussion of this view is Eleonore Stump, "Petitionary Prayer," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16/2 (1979): 81–91.

12. The best current defense of the classical position on the incarnation is Thomas V. Morris, *The Logic of God Incarnate* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986).

with human beings. To enter into such a relationship is to imply that God is changeable and that he has some need to enter into a loving relationship with us, as Jesus Christ obviously does.

Ostler's view of God and man also underlies his discussion of salvation (justification) and the atonement. Since human beings have real freedom, they can be held partially, but only partially, responsible for their personal relationship with God. Since God is a being to whom moral terms apply because he is fundamentally like us, doctrines like sin, grace, and atonement must be understood in a way consistent with the fundamental attributes of divine love and individual moral responsibility. The concept of original sin in its classical (Augustinian) formation includes imputing the consequences of one person's sin (i.e., Adam's) to others who are not themselves guilty of it. This is a morally unsustainable conclusion, and Mormonism properly rejects it. We are, however, still sinful beings because we alienate ourselves from God by our own actions and our desires (2:119–46).[13]

As morally sensitive free beings we have some responsibility for our own salvation. God's grace, however, is real and necessary. It is a gift that is unmerited but freely given as a means of turning us away from our self-deception, which, for Ostler, is the essence of sinfulness. Divine grace, however, does not make us righteous by itself. Nor does grace operate in distinction to or in opposition to our will (2:351–432).[14] We must freely invite God into our lives—we must trust God—for his grace to be a means of our salvation. At this point Mormonism is plainly distinct from classical Protestantism. It is closer to the Thomistic position of concurring grace,[15] but with a profound distinction: Since freedom is real and omniscience only available for past

13. There are contemporary thinkers who still defend the imputation of Adam's sin to us. See Anthony B. Badger, "TULIP: A Free Grace Perspective, Part 1: Total Depravity," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 16/31 (2003): 35–61; and Michael Rea, "The Metaphysics of Original Sin," in *Persons: Human and Divine,* ed. Dean Zimmerman and Peter van Inwagen (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

14. On the contemporary evangelical notion of justification by grace, see Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1985); for a contemporary Latter-day Saint appreciation of grace, see Robert L. Millet, *Grace Works* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003).

15. Thomism refers to Thomas Aquinas.

and present events, it must be the case that God could not know nor can he cause what our response to his gracious love will be.

Finally, Ostler develops a richly nuanced view of the atonement, somewhat different from the standard in Mormon thinking. He rejects most of the classical theories of the atonement that have deeply influenced common Mormon thought and writing. He is especially critical of the line of thinking that starts with Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109) and reaches its apex in Calvin. Known technically as the penal substitution theory, it will sound familiar to many Latter-day Saint readers.[16]

The theory is this: Humans have sinned and need to be punished, but the punishment that we deserve is too heavy for us to bear. So our elder brother volunteers to accept the punishment we merit. In so doing he clears our debt with God so that God can give us his love abundantly. Given common expression in stories such as that of the brother who repays the father the money stolen by the sibling, the theory has a certain cachet. But for Ostler it is deeply flawed. Several reasons are given on this point, but for our purposes here we may focus on the two that are crucial in Ostler's view. First, the theory is unjust, and as created moral beings with a conscience, we know it. What moral sense does it make to punish the innocent for the sins of the guilty? Would we accept such a view in any other context? Would a guilty person be thought righteous because someone else served his prison sentence or was executed in his stead? Of course not, says Ostler. Listening to our internal moral voice will reveal that this makes no sense. Nor does the position of some Mormon authors that Christ actually became guilty in our stead fare any better.[17] In an attempt to save the principle of punishing only the guilty, some have argued that Christ actually became a sinner. For Ostler, such a view is simply nonsense. It entails that Christ was guilty

16. Anselm of Canterbury, "Cur Deus Homo (Why God Became Man)," in *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works,* ed. Brian Davies and Gillian Evans (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 260–356; Calvin, *Institutes,* 1:503–34; for a contemporary defense, see J. I. Packer, *What Did the Cross Achieve? The Logic of Penal Substitution* (Leicester: TSF Monograph, 1974).

17. This view is advanced in Stephen E. Robinson, *Believing Christ: The Parable of the Bicycle and Other Good News* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992). Neither does he think much of the idea that a ransom must be paid to Satan to secure a release, a view found in Ronald A. Heiner, "The Necessity of a Sinless Messiah," *BYU Studies* 22 (1982): 5–30.

even though he did nothing wrong. This view is wrong in the same way as the notion of original sin—that is, it involves imputing the guilt of one to another. If we reject the idea that we can be held guilty of the sin of another, Adam, then why would we accept the same flawed principle of imputed sinfulness in the case of Christ?

Ostler's view has something in common with Abelard's theory of Christ's moral influence in turning our hearts to God.[18] But Ostler's compassion theory goes much farther. "The purpose of the Atonement," he writes, "is to overcome our alienation by creating compassion, a life shared in union where we are moved by our love for each other" (2:235). Christ comes to be with us and suffer like us, to break through the alienation that we have created by our own sin. Christ suffers for us by being mortal, and in so doing he offers us his love freely to bridge the gap between him and us that we have created by our own self-deceptive turning away from him.

By being with us, Christ enables us to freely choose to walk back into God's loving embrace. "He will take upon him their infirmities, that his bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh," writes Alma, "that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities" (Alma 7:12). This is a teaching that is at the core of Ostler's theory of the atonement. To be reconciled to us, Christ must understand our plight. Thus he must come and suffer with us to be moved by our condition. For us, the atonement softens our hearts and enables us to choose a loving relationship with Christ.

> The grace of Christ's love, manifested in his life and way of being with us, works in us to persuade us to soften the hardened exterior that we create to protect our tender hearts. When we truly realize that God himself has become what we are and that he loves us so much that he is willing to be in relationship with us even though it causes him extensive and intense suffering, we can be persuaded by his compassion for us to soften our hearts and open up to receive him. (2:240)

18. Richard E. Weingart, *The Logic of Divine Love: A Critical Analysis of the Soteriology of Peter Abailard [Abelard]* (London: Clarendon, 1970).

That is the essence of the compassion theory that Ostler sees as a unique teaching of Mormonism.

I have only been able to scratch the surface of these important volumes. As noted, they are the most competent works of their kind in Mormonism. That Ostler takes positions at odds with other Mormon writers ought to provoke a civil discussion of key issues. Hopefully we will not have to wait decades for another work of this kind.

II

I have great respect for Ostler's theological work, but we should recognize that one might start at a different place than Ostler and draw different conclusions. The first and most astounding feature of the first vision and the coming forth of the Book of Mormon is one simple idea: God answers prayers. Joseph knew he needed wisdom, so he sought it from what he believed was the best source—God.

What, however, makes Joseph's prayer for guidance and our prayers comprehensible? Must it not be because God can give advice, which we always ought to follow? God's advice is qualitatively different from and superior to anything we can get from professionals, friends, or family. Why go to the trouble to pray if God's advice is no better than what we can get from other sources? Why pray for a true contracausal miracle[19] such as Jesus performed if we are not certain that he has the ability and knowledge to perform such a deed? But this line of thinking leads us in the direction of conceding that God must have the very qualities that Ostler rejects.[20] Furthermore, consider our temple commitments. They are "absolute" commitments. But complete and absolute commitments

19. All we know about the chain of natural causes in the world leads us to conclude that X will happen. Yet something else, Y, happens instead. This is especially true when all we know about the world would lead us to conclude that Y could not have happened, such as raising Lazarus from the dead.

20. Ostler never discusses the concept of "centering prayer," in which the object is not to ask but to center your will on God's will for you. "Not my will but Thine be done" is the key to this sort of prayer. This provides a view of prayer more compatible with the traditional picture of divine attributes. See Thomas Keating, *Intimacy with God* (New York: Crossroad Books, 1994); and Thomas Keating, *Centering Prayer in Daily Life and Ministry* (New York: Continuum, 1998).

only make sense if they are commitments to an absolute source about whose knowledge and power to reciprocate we have no doubt.

Properly thought out, Mormonism in practice seems to lead us to a picture of God at odds with Ostler's. Perhaps this explains the obvious preference of Latter-day Saints for the classical picture of God. Ostler believes that this preference is misguided. But he never explains how such educated and such spiritually sophisticated people have adopted a position he regards as so wrong.

I think Ostler is right about the atonement and the difficulties about the traditional views, but it would have been helpful to show why so many have been attracted to debt repayment and penal substitution theories. I have my own suspicions of theories about this, but it would have been nice to see Ostler's understanding of why so many Latter-day Saint writers have read Alma to be teaching a version of a penal substitution theory.

Ostler's third volume will, according to him, treat the problem of evil (also known as theodicy) and the idea of the Trinity. I should like to engage these topics briefly in order to raise questions for Ostler's fundamental theology. The problem of evil has engaged serious thinkers for millennia, as the book of Job testifies. The solution most compatible with Ostler's theology is the combination of free will and character-building claims that have patristic ancestry and that have been so brilliantly developed by John Hick in his seminal *Evil and the God of Love*.[21] Hick's argument is familiar to Latter-day Saints. We bring most evils on ourselves by our own free acts. Their existence does not count against God's goodness or existence. Evil and suffering in general build personal strength and character, which in turn enable us to get through further trials. Analogies are often made in popular accounts to the defects of overprotective parents or to one who learns compassion through having a serious illness.

The problem with this sort of view is what Marilyn Adams calls "horrendous evils" in her seminal response.[22] Some persons are put

21. John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966).

22. Marilyn M. Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999); for a variety of views, see Marilyn M. Adams, ed., *The Problem of Evil* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

through such evils that their character cannot develop. One thinks of rape, pedophilia, and torture as three examples. On a larger scale one thinks of genocide and the Holocaust as cases in point. These evils surpass any plausible amount needed for building character. Why should we have faith in God in the face of these purposeless horrors? Adams argues powerfully that faith still makes sense because God's qualities of love, wisdom, and power are such that accepting him as a real presence in our lives is reasonable even in the face of the horrible. Solving the problem of horrendous evil may seem to require us to have faith in a God with precisely the attitude that Ostler rejects. Furthermore, we might note that God's answer to Job in chapters 38–42 does not imply a character-building argument but rather appears to appeal to those qualities of God that Ostler wishes to reject, God's absolute power and knowledge.

Finally, we might note the interconnection of Christology and social trinitarianism and the problem it creates in Ostler's thought. Ostler holds, with the Mormon tradition, a social trinitarian view of the Godhead. Social trinitarianism has become popular in many theological circles in the last two decades.[23] It does, however, have ancient roots, especially in the Cappadocian fathers and later in the eastern Christian church. There are three beings united in a special kind of indwelling love that the Cappadocians call perichoresis, or "mutual indwelling." The analogy is often made to three indwelling lights from lanterns or light bulbs. The light from the three indwelling lights will be greater than what would be arrived at adding the lumens of the three lights sepa-

23. For some current work on social trinitarianism with which Ostler is in dialogue, see Cornelius Plantinga Jr., "Social Trinity and Tritheism," in *Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement: Philosophical and Theological Essays,* ed. Ronald J. Feenstra and Cornelius Plantinga Jr. (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 32–47; David Brown, *The Divine Trinity* (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1985); Richard Swinburne, *The Christian God* (London: Oxford University Press, 1994); Stephen T. Davis, "Perichoretic Monotheism: A Defense of a Social Theory of the Trinity," in *The Trinity: East/West Dialogue,* ed. Melville Y. Stewart (Dordrecht, Neth.: Kluwer Academic, 2003), 35–52. Ostler's view is especially close to that of Davis. For a very useful comparative essay, see Paul Owen, "The Doctrine of the Trinity in LDS and 'Catholic' Contexts," *Element: The Journal of the Society for Mormon Philosophy and Theology* 1 (2005): 59–84.

rately. Thus, the indwelling of the three in mutual love is at the heart of the Godhead.

Then, however, in one of the volumes under review, Ostler adopts a view of Christ's person—that is, a Christology—that focuses on what is called divine *kenosis*. *Kenosis* is a Greek term that refers to God's emptying himself of his divine properties in order to come down and establish a relationship with us. The Book of Mormon refers to the same idea as "the condescension of God." Ostler calls his view a modified kenotic Christology. It is modified because core problems of classical Christology stem from placing God and man in qualitatively distinct and hierarchical levels of existence, a move that Ostler rejects, as do most Latter-day Saint writers. But here is the problem. If the Son empties himself of his divinity or even some part of it to be with us, then can he any longer be a real partner in the social trinity? Will not the divine light be diminished, as would the three lamps if one were lowered?

Conclusion

Ostler's project is deeply important. Perhaps it signals the start of a true intellectually rigorous Mormon theological tradition that can stand on its own with other theologies like those of Thomism or, more recently, Karl Barth. Furthermore it might signal that we as a people are mature enough as a tradition to engage in robust theological conversations among ourselves. Such a development can only be welcomed. True faith is strong enough to withstand the most probing inquiry and analysis. It may well be the right time for Ostler's project and the right time for others to engage him in dialogue.