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Strangers in Paradox: Explorations in Mormon Theology Margaret
and Paul Toscano

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MARGARET and PAUL TOSCANO. *Strangers in Paradox: Explorations in Mormon Theology*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990. xiii, 301 pp. Bibliography. \$12.95.

Reviewed by Richard D. Poll, professor emeritus of history, Western Illinois University.

Strangers in Paradox is a stimulating and sometimes aggravating book. Its chapters, divided among five parts, are interrelated essays about deity and humanity; the first two essays are introductory, the next seventeen cumulative, and the last four supplementary. Its authors, a wife-husband team, are specialists in the humanities, Hebrew, and law and are knowledgeable about the popular “alternate voices” in the *Sunstone* sphere of contemporary Mormonism. The Toscanos modestly affirm that “this is not a systematic theology, nor is it reflective of mainstream Mormon thought” (xi). They successfully accomplish their goal “to be clear and thought-provoking without being strident or dogmatic” (xi). Among the many provocative ideas in what critics may dismiss as simply a brief for giving women the priesthood is this: “Because godhood is the highest and final dimension of priesthood and because godhood is male and female, it follows that priesthood must be male and female as well” (152).

The intriguing title derives from Joseph Smith’s 1844 assertion that “by proving contraries, truth is made manifest” (1, citing *History of the Church* 6:428). Accepting a definition of paradox as a statement that seems contradictory but may be true in fact, the Toscanos have written a book to show that “by examining various, even contrary views, new truths may be revealed” (1). Many of the contraries discussed in the book do not qualify semantically as paradoxes, being propositions in conflict (salvation is by grace, not works) rather than internally contradictory propositions (Jesus is God and man). With some exceptions, the authors’ method is to transform “either/or” conflicts between religious ideas into “both/and” amalgams: “It is not in the elimination of extremes that life comes forth, but in their tension and balance, where contraries come into accord” (248). Readers will differ on the plausibility of the results, but they are frequently reminded that individual freedom, one of the book’s central themes, gives them that right. The Toscanos speak only for themselves, and they “reserve the right to change [their] minds, even on fundamentals” (15).

Part 1, “First Principles,” presents three ideological “cornerstones” and seven methodological “keystones.” The keystones

explicate the third cornerstone, which states that “the mythical approach to understanding religious ideas is as useful and valuable as the historical method” (9). This cornerstone leads the Toscanos to concentrate on religious texts, symbols, and rituals, seeking present relevance and value without worrying about historicity and objectivity questions. Belief-structures that have commanded the allegiance of others are entitled to respect while at the same time a person should recognize that their meaning has varied among cultures and over time and that God’s is only one of the voices speaking through them. God’s voice is to be sought, however, through “the lens of a sacral world view” (31). If one focuses on “the transcendent, the supernatural, and the symbolic meaning of events,” then texts, symbols, and rituals “can serve as a conduit for actual spiritual power and as a means of revealing heavenly patterns” (21–23).

The two cornerstones that support the Toscanos’ theological structure are “The Paradox of Jesus: God and Man — Male and Female” and “The Paradox of Male and Female.” Their fundamental assumptions are that “Jesus Christ is God” and “the sexes [are] necessary opposites of . . . equal value” (5, 7). Most of the book seeks to relate these two ideas to each other and to the doctrines and practices of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, past, present, and future. In this effort, Joseph Smith, the scriptures that he produced, and many of the doctrines of traditional Church theology are used. The hierarchical, bureaucratic, and pragmatic elements of today’s Church are seen as impediments to the actualization of the gospel of Christ in the lives of individuals and the realization of the vision of Zion.

Part 2, “Godhead,” tackles the apparent contradictions in concepts like anthropomorphism, omnipotence, and eternity with intriguing results. In the heavens are God the Father and God the Mother, parents of spirit offspring. Two of their sons, Michael and Lucifer, came before them with plans for the temporal, embodying phase of their children’s eternal existence. Michael’s view prevailed, and he became the first man, Adam. To make the necessary choices and become the mother of all living, God the Mother became Eve. Later, to overcome death and make exaltation possible, God the Father became Jesus.

Joseph Smith declared the paradox of time and eternity. Orthodoxy and, to some extent, traditional Mormonism have attempted to deny or ignore one or the other element of this paradox. But we cannot do this without denying a part of ourselves. Jesus could not do this. Eve could not do this. They could not deny time, or flesh, or the potential for evil. Instead, they reaffirmed these realities by showing us that the

divine kingdom is a realm of spirit and element, flesh and glory, light and darkness, good and evil, pleasure and pain, life and death. It is a kingdom in which time and eternity are espoused. And for the preservation of this kingdom, these deities laid aside their glory and godhood; each journeyed into an appointed garden, unprotected, to wrestle with pain, humiliation, and death. Eve went to Eden and her tree like a bride to the bridegroom. Christ went to Gethsemane and his cross like a bridegroom to the bride. And in them, the intersection of the cosmos, the source and repose of paradox, the marriage of time and eternity was consummated. (104)

Part 3, “Redemption,” argues uncompromisingly for salvation by grace, condemning the contemporary Church’s emphasis on good works, especially those performed by assignment. Although other parts of the book assign importance to good works, particularly ordinances, salvation is described as an unearned, sometimes even unsought, infusion of the the Holy Spirit that transforms life: “We are not here to avoid pain and impurity but to bring good out of evil while immersed in all the manifold convolutions of a temporal world” (112–13).

The seven chapters on “Priesthood” (part 4) describe two aspects of priesthood — power and ordination. The authors draw on scripture, particularly the Book of Mormon, and on the history of religions to show that the power to act for God has not been limited to a single sex or a single institution. In the rituals and ordinances of the Nauvoo period, Joseph Smith initiated both women and men into the “fulness of the priesthood,” which he associated with the prophet Elijah, and the temple ceremonies still incorporate the concept of a kingdom of priests and priestesses. The Toscanos argue that the church must use the spiritual and intellectual powers of women on terms of equality with men to fulfill its mission: “We can see a parliament of prophets and prophetesses, where member-representatives of local congregations meet with general authorities to work out the policies and practices of a church governed by spiritual gifts and characterized by community and consent” (219).

Explorations of the spiritual significance of plural marriage, the veils that women wear in the temple, and the endowment itself conclude the book. The authors show how veils of various kinds have been used for religious purposes, sometimes to emphasize holiness, and they invite people who are uncomfortable with this feature of temple attire to see the veil as “a paradoxical symbol evoking both positive and negative associations” (267).

The writers are almost always clear; they have impressive imaginations and analytic powers; they draw on a wide range of

sacred and secular literature; they occasionally repeat their arguments; their rhetoric frequently achieves overkill. Their approach to the scriptures suggests Bruce R. McConkie: take the scriptures literally but interpret them freely. Their approach to feminist religious studies suggests Hugh Nibley: marshal related examples and suggest that they constitute proof or disproof.

Strangers in Paradox is definitely not old wine in a new bottle. It should be of considerable interest to students of Latter-day Saint theology. Some of them may be turned off by it, some may find browsing sufficient, some may argue with it, and many may derive new insights from it. It is unlikely that anyone will agree with everything. Indeed, in the time since the book was written even the Toscanos may have changed their minds.