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The First Vision. Stained glass, 84" x 60", 1913. Courtesy Museum of Church History and Art. The artist has included spring flowers and even Joseph's hat to show that this was a real boy, in a specific location, in the midst of a historical event, being visited by real embodied beings. The context of light is dramatically expressed through rays and clouds.

The Doctrine of Divine Embodiment: Restoration, Judeo-Christian, and Philosophical Perspectives

David L. Paulsen

When the Savior shall appear we shall see him as he is. We shall see that he is a man like ourselves. . . . The Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man's; the Son also; but the Holy Ghost has not a body of flesh and bones, but is a personage of Spirit. (D&C 130:1, 22)¹

So Joseph Smith definitively declared on April 2, 1843. The doctrine that God the Father and God the Son are embodied persons, humanlike in form, has rich implications for both philosophical anthropology and theology,² and it is one of the most distinctive teachings of the Restoration. While believers find the doctrine elevating and inspiring, critics have challenged it as being non-Christian and philosophically incoherent. I believe the critics are mistaken on both counts.

¹"Section 130 is a composite of instructions given by Joseph Smith on Sunday, April 2, 1843, in Ramus, Illinois. The first seventeen verses were given after the Prophet heard Orson Hyde preach in the morning meeting." Robert J. Woodford, *The Historical Development of the Doctrine and Covenants*, 3 vols. (Ph. D. diss., Brigham Young University, 1974), 3:1710. In the morning sermon, Orson had said, "It is our privilege to have the Father and Son dwelling in our hearts." Apparently, Joseph wanted to make sure that Orson's statement would not be misunderstood. He thus distinguished the Latter-day Saint understanding of God, which held God to be embodied in humanlike form and hence unable to dwell literally in one's heart (D&C 130:3), from the god of the classical creeds, who, being immaterial, could dwell anywhere and everywhere. Joseph Smith Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed., rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1964), 5:323-24.

²For instance, belief in an embodied God is interconnected in Mormon thought with many of its most paradigmatic ideas, including such basic LDS teachings as the divine nature and destiny of human beings as God's children, the

In this paper, I trace the restoration of the doctrine of divine embodiment, showing that the doctrine was clearly articulated from the beginning of the Restoration. Then, I argue that the earliest Christians widely believed that God is embodied,³ and finally, I examine major philosophical objections to the idea of God having a body of any kind, showing them to be unconvincing.⁴

Throughout this discussion, it is important to keep certain usages in mind. In the western theistic tradition, *spirit* is primarily equated with immateriality. As I show in this paper, however, in all LDS discourse (as well as in early Judaic and Christian sources), spirits are not understood to be immaterial but rather to be composed of refined matter,⁵ and thus they are bodies (see Ether 3:16). Accordingly, I use the term *corporeal* to mean having a body of any kind, including those comprised of spirit matter as well as flesh and bone. Likewise, I use the term *embodied* to mean having any sort of body, whether spirit, mortal, or exalted. Conversely, I use the terms *incorporeal*, *immaterial*, and *unembodied* to signify being without a body of any kind. Although the term *anthropomorphism* is often used to refer to any ascription of humanlike characteristics to God (for example, passions), I use it primarily in reference to God having a body, humanlike in form.

purpose of mortal life, the eternal worth of the body, and the physical resurrection. Within Christian theology generally, the LDS doctrine also makes possible a coherent understanding of the Incarnation—the affirmation that God the Son was numerically identical with Jesus of Nazareth. Christian theologians have often subscribed to an idea of God as transcendent in every way, having no properties in common with man: “God is qualitatively different from man in the extreme. There is no greater divide in the ontology of the Bible than that between creator and creature.” This idea has led many such theologians to reject the Incarnation as being a logical and metaphysical impossibility. Thomas V. Morris, *The Logic of God Incarnate* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986), 18–19.

³Portions of this part of this article were previously published as “Early Christian Beliefs in a Corporeal Deity: Origen and Augustine as Reluctant Witnesses,” *Harvard Theological Review* 83 (1990): 105–16 and as “Reply to Kim Paffenroth’s Comment,” *Harvard Theological Review* 86 (1993): 235–39. Reprinted by permission.

⁴Much of the material in this part was previously published as “Must God Be Incorporeal?” *Faith and Philosophy* 6 (1989): 76–87. Reprinted by permission.

⁵Joseph Fielding Smith, comp., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1972), 207, 301–2 (hereafter cited as *TPJS*). See also D&C 93:33.