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Douglas J. Davies. *Joseph Smith, Jesus, and Satanic Opposition: Atonement, Evil, and the Mormon Vision.*

Farnham, England: Ashgate, 2010.

Reviewed by Steven L. Olsen

Douglas J. Davies is one of the most insightful and prolific scholars of Mormonism working today. He is a professor in the Department of Theology and Religion at the University of Durham, UK. Two of his earlier studies—*The Mormon Culture of Salvation* (2000) and *An Introduction to Mormonism* (2003)—analyze foundational aspects of Mormonism from an engaging academic synthesis of history, religious studies, cultural studies, literary studies, theology, and philosophy. The breadth and depth of his scholarly background enable him to address new and crucial questions, yielding remarkable insights. For example, *The Mormon Culture of Salvation* proposes that the plan of salvation is Mormonism’s “doctrine of doctrines,” its most far-reaching theological innovation.

Davies’s most recent study on Mormonism develops this thesis to a greater degree. It claims that the doctrine of the plan of salvation is as fundamental and distinctive to Mormonism as the Trinity is to the rest of Christianity. Furthermore, the plan of salvation anchors a comprehensive Mormon worldview, influences Mormon religious thought and life more than any other single doctrine, and defines the essential identities of Jesus, Satan, and Joseph Smith.

Davies pursues this complex thesis through an in-depth examination of Latter-day Saints’ understanding of three paradigmatic events: “A pre-mortal council in heaven, the passion of Jesus in Gethsemane and the first vision of Joseph Smith” (1). This thesis unfolds along various lines of inquiry, as reflected in the focus of the book’s dozen chapters: the Christology of early Mormon America; the Mormon identification with biblical Israel; Mormon millennialism, especially the extreme version authored by the schismatic leader James J. Strang; the plan of salvation and the Godhead; the mortal mission of Jesus Christ; the respective identities of Jesus, Joseph Smith, and Lucifer; Christ’s Atonement in relation to the plan of salvation; the problem of evil in Mormonism; Mormon notions of kinship and family;

the tripartite heaven of the Latter-day Saints; the nature and role of the Holy Ghost; and the role of sacrifice in mortality and eternity.

Within these general headings, Davies examines a dizzying array of individual topics, including the translations of the Book of Mormon and the Book of Abraham, the nature of revelation, succession of leadership in the Church, the character of Joseph Smith, personal piety and other core Mormon values, Mormon temple rituals, LDS art and iconography, the structure of Mormon social life, the transformation of Mormon religious identity over time, language and the expression of Mormon culture, patriotism and politics among the Latter-day Saints, the management of formal group boundaries, changing concepts of ethnicity and race, the use of speculative disciplines (theology and philosophy) by Latter-day Saints, Joseph Smith's martyrdom, Mormon notions of the human body, Adam-God controversies, patriarchal blessings, and notions of priesthood and power, to name a few. The book's bibliography is as extensive and eclectic as are its contents.

I applaud Davies's scholarly ambitions and have sympathy for many of his general perspectives. His insights into the cultural, theological, and metaphysical implications of such foundational doctrines as the plan of salvation are worthy of more serious consideration by Mormon scholars generally.

That said, I find this particular attempt unsatisfying because, while expansive, the study does not provide a systematic treatment of the innumerable "nooks and crannies" of Mormonism that are affected by the plan of salvation. Davies certainly gives us much more than a simple lexicon of related doctrines and practices. His analysis of the parts, however, is too disparate to provide a compelling appreciation of the whole. To borrow an analogy from the textile industry, Davies's present study may have been more successful with fewer individual strands and more overall patterning.

To illustrate the problematic nature of the study, I focus in detail on perhaps its paradigmatic chapter, whose title, "Joseph, Jesus and Lucifer," reflects that of the book as a whole. In its opening paragraph Davies declares that this chapter will "explore the mutual identity of these three agents in their agonistic achievement of salvation" (109). While it appears that Davies intends to explore how these identities have been formed and transformed over time, he does not clearly define what he means by "identity." My own academic training suggests that "identity" distinguishes the role, status, and significance of a person or subgroup in society. Identity is thus more permanent than "personality," more comprehensive than "character," and at the same time informed by the cultural context of which the person or group is a part. So when a chapter focuses on identity, I expect insights into

how Mormons have defined and used the respective identities of (1) Joseph Smith (and his successors) as “prophet,” “seer,” “revelator,” “apostle,” “president,” and so on; (2) Jesus as “Christ,” “Messiah,” “Jehovah,” “Son of God,” “Lamb of God,” and so on; and (3) Satan as “Lucifer,” “devil,” “serpent,” “Perdition,” and so on. A more rigorous treatment of these respective cultural roles would have done much to achieve better the lofty objectives of this chapter and of the entire book. While the chapter provides a variety of insightful details, it does not always deliver on its scholarly promises. I cite a few examples.

The second paragraph of the chapter opens with the evocative declaration, “As for Jesus, his identity is ever reconstructed, era by era” (109). Rather than demonstrating how Mormons have reimagined Jesus “era by era” since 1820, the chapter instead identifies disparate sources—primarily art and text—through which Jesus has been depicted by Mormons over the years. Further on, instead of evaluating the various roles for which Joseph Smith claimed divine authority and through which he attracted endless controversy, Davies considers several qualities of his personality (111–15). However, other Mormon scholars have examined Joseph’s personality in greater depth. In addition, Davies draws conclusions about Joseph’s psyche from words that the Mormon Prophet attributes to God. Because Davies does not apply in this case the anthropological ethic of “letting the natives speak for themselves,” he implies that Joseph suffers from the more serious character flaw of systematic and structural misrepresentation. Because Davies does not work out the ramifications of this implication, his characterization of the Mormon Prophet remains unclear.

Davies further explores Joseph’s identity by citing his occasional use of code names for himself and others (115–16). While this practice is evocative, Davies uses it to reveal nothing further about Joseph’s identity beyond the ambiguous conclusion that “Joseph explored language in several forms” (116). Davies’s next point about Joseph’s identity involves the antiquity of the Book of Abraham (116–18). Pursuing this question, he relies primarily on a single modern source that questions the authenticity of Joseph’s translation. Davies implies once again that Joseph misrepresented his prophetic gifts but avoids the explicit treatment of the alleged character flaw. In a section titled “Joseph’s Temptations,” Davies summarizes Joseph’s encounter with Satan immediately prior to the First Vision (118–21). The analysis says little about the identity of either Joseph or Satan as revealed in the encounter, except to draw potential parallels between the language and imagery of Joseph’s various accounts of the event and other possible, primarily biblical, sources. While merely observing that Smith’s varied accounts “show how Joseph’s religious thought was developing” (122), this study does not use

such empirical sources to illuminate how Joseph's identity was evolving, to offer a thorough discussion of the dynamics of Mormon thought, or to systematically reconstruct the evolution of the plan of salvation as exemplified in Joseph's own revelations.

While similar disappointments do not pervade all other chapters of Davies's book, I found myself repeatedly wishing for a more consistent, coherent, and systematic treatment of the stated thesis. The book contains many individual insights that justify reading it, and on these grounds I can recommend it to others. For me, its greatest insights come from the disciplines of theology and philosophy; less satisfying were those from cultural, literary, and historical studies. My familiarity with Davies's earlier works created for me high expectations that were not met with this present effort, though I have no doubt that such a perceptive scholar will produce even more cogent studies in the future.

Steven L. Olsen (who can be contacted via email at byustudies@byu.edu) received his PhD in cultural anthropology from the University of Chicago. He has presented and published widely in the fields of Mormon studies and museum studies. He has also served in leadership positions of such professional organizations as Utah Humanities Council, American Society of Church History, Western Museums Association, Utah State Office of Museum Services, and Charles Redd Center for Western Studies.