Exploring Mormon Thought: Of God and Gods

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Blake T. Ostler

Blake T. Ostler. *Exploring Mormon Thought: Of God and Gods.* Volume 3.

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Reviewed by James Morse McLachlan

Blake T. Ostler's monumental systematic work, *Exploring Mormon Thought,* continues to be a major event in the development of Mormon philosophical theology. Over the last fifteen years, work on Mormonism in the general field of religious studies has exploded. There are far too many works to give even a partial list here, but I will highlight a few of the notable authors. Terryl L. Givens publishes thoughtful and nuanced work in such books as *When Souls Had Wings: Pre-Mortal Existence in Western Thought*; Stephen H. Webb memorably discusses Mormon "materialism" from the perspective of a philosophical theologian outside Mormonism in *Jesus Christ, Eternal God: Heavenly Flesh and the Metaphysics of Matter*; Adam S. Miller's *Rube Goldberg Machines: Essays in Mormon Theology* gives a postmodern take on the whole project of Mormon theology; and editor David L. Paulsen's volume *Mormonism in Dialogue with Contemporary Christian Theologies* tops a group of impressive collections on Mormon theology.[1] However, nothing equals Ostler's projected five-volume opus in scope or completeness. Volume 3, *Of God and Gods,* focuses on the LDS understanding of deification. It consists of twelve chapters and is as massive as the first two volumes—some 425 pages, excluding the bibliography and index.

In reviewing Ostler's newest book, I feel somewhat like the poor German philosopher who was asked to review Georg W. F. Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit.* Both books are incredibly rich and defy short

1. Other recent theological articles from this journal include Stephen H. Webb, "Godbodied: The Matter of the Latter-day Saints," 50, no. 3 (2011): 83–100; Joseph M. Spencer, "The Four Discourses of Mormonism," 50, no. 1 (2011): 4–24; and David L. Paulsen, "Are Christians Mormon? Reassessing Joseph Smith's Theology in His Bicentennial," 45, no. 1 (2006): 35–128.

summary. In the preface to the *Phenomenology,* Hegel talks about the inadequacies of reviews and excoriates those armchair thinkers who just read reviews but never read books. That is not to say that Ostler's book is as dense as Hegel's; in fact, it is his most accessible volume so far. But if readers really want to know what Ostler says in *Of God and Gods*, they will have to read it. They may disagree, as I do, with some of his major claims about the relation between God and gods. But this book says a lot that is important and will be a welcome challenge to any interested in Mormon theology.

Much of the oversight in the contemporary analytic philosophy of religion, besides the fact that it often ignores world religions except Christianity and Judaism, is that it almost never considers biblical scholarship. Rather, it accepts the concept of God bequeathed to it by the church councils and by tradition. While Ostler's book does not consider other traditions beyond the biblical one, he does spend considerable time in a discussion of biblical scholarship and the history of the scripture. This discussion takes up about half the text and establishes the Mormon claims about divinity and deification as a possible, if not a better, reading of the scriptural tradition. Chapters 1–5 discuss divine councils and the plurality of God and gods from Genesis through Deuteronomy and from Psalms, through Isaiah and the prophets, to the Second Temple and finally to the New Testament, with special attention to the Christology of "indwelling unity" in the Gospel of John.[2]

Ostler recognizes the poetic character of the writings of the prophets. He does not see monotheistic-sounding passages like Isaiah's as conflicting with the more pluralist council passages of Psalms, Genesis, and Deuteronomy. The prophets, he says, are not "playing the language game of propositional assertion in the context of systematic theology" (65). Rather, they write like poets, using imagery, hyperbole, and other standard literary techniques. "Thus, such hyperbolic statements about the other gods cannot be inconsistent for the simple reason that logical consistency is not the language game underlying their poetic allusions" (65). Ostler discusses a variety of Apocalyptic Second Temple and early Christian writings, including, among others, Enoch, Revelation, and

2. There are some unfortunate scriptural citation errors in the book. For example, in Ostler's very interesting discussion about the logos as made manifest and the John 1:18 assertion that no one has seen God, Ostler cites Exodus 33:1 and Deuteronomy 34:20, noting that Moses has seen God face to face (172). The actual references are 33:11 and 34:10.

Justin Martyr. Opposed to claims that Second Temple Judaism moved from "species identity" that Yahweh shared with other gods of the divine council to Yahweh's unique identity as Creator and Ruler of All, Ostler argues that such "'vestigial forms' of species identity shared by Yahweh with others" permeate the books of this period, including the New Testament (118–19).

In chapter 4, "The Relation of the Father and the Son: Kingship Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament," Ostler takes up his major theological contention for this volume, *kingship monotheism*. His aim is to show that there is what he will later call a "weak . . . ontological difference" (326) between the three members of the Godhead—particularly the Father—and the gods of the council.

I think Ostler assumes a consistency in the scriptural traditions of the advantages of the Davidic kingship that is, to say the least, controversial. The Old Testament writers do not speak with one voice on the advantages of kingship. Ostler also assumes that patronage in the ancient Mediterranean is a good model for the relation of the Father and the Son (128–30, 190), which is not undisputed. John Dominic Crossin, for example, not an uncontroversial figure himself, argues that Jesus teaches against the patronage structure of the ancient world. I mention this because Ostler thinks that his model of kingship monotheism explains Mormon ideas of deification, it being more in line with New Testament understanding of deification.

While Ostler often reiterates that Mormonism repudiates creation *ex nihilo* and thus argues that there is no ontological dividing between God and creation, and especially between God and other persons, he preserves the "hierarchy of being" while at the same time insisting on the community and sociality of persons with God (185). He refers to the glorification of Christ and sees the disciples given the same glory. The Father, the Son, and the disciples are all "one" by virtue of the glory that they all share (188). But this is not to claim absolute equality. God is king from eternity, whereas humans have been deified and participate in divinity. Perhaps inconsistently, Ostler does not see God's kingship as an example of the poetic hyperbole that he attributes earlier to the poetic utterances in Isaiah and elsewhere in the prophets (188).

Of God and Gods makes many other important contributions to Mormon theology, notably its critique of the traditional Western Christian understanding of the Trinity, which has been greatly influenced by the Neoplatonic doctrine of divine simplicity. In chapter 6, "Latin Trinity, Logic, and Scripture," Ostler claims that to assert that God is

metaphysically simple is in tension with the view that in God are distinct divine persons. "Such a way of construing the New Testament claims is simply not sustainable in good faith" (205).

Ostler has an obvious sympathy for the subject of chapter 7, "Social Trinitarianism." This view starts with the Trinity's threeness as basic—rather than a oneness—and attempts to explain how three distinct centers of will and cognitive and conative faculties can yet be one God. This idea fits better with the LDS emphasis on the oneness of the Will. But how do three distinct centers become one will? This leads Ostler into a discussion with such analytic and evangelical philosophers of religion as Richard Swinburne, William Lane Craig, and J. P. Moreland (219–37). He prefers Stephen Davis's "perichoretic" view of Social Trinitarianism (237–39), in which Davis emphasizes that "God is like a community" (239), an idea also found extensively in David L. Paulsen's work.[3]

The final five chapters deal with the stated subject of the book from an LDS point of view: God and gods. In chapter 8, "The Godhead in Mormon Thought," Ostler claims that in Mormon thought, the members of the Godhead are truly "other" to each other, and each is to the other a "Thou." Ostler argues that both the biblical and Mormon scriptures consistently adopt kingship monotheism, which says that "humans are eternally subordinate to and dependent on their relationship of loving unity with the divine persons for their status as *gods*" (261). This subordination is an important part of Mormon tradition, but it seems to me that other parts of the tradition are in tension with it. Notable examples include teachings by Brigham Young and later B. H. Roberts, and more recently Richard Bushman's reading of Joseph Smith's King Follett Sermon. Still, I think Ostler's position is well argued and very well supported. It is a position that many Mormons have taken in the past and will continue to take in the future, until either further revelation or the coming of Christ sorts this one out for us.

Chapter 10, "Logical Problems of Deification," argues for a "weak but not a strong ontological difference" between God and man, because "it is not possible for humans to be gods or to realize inherent divinity unless there is a physical change actuated by entering into a relationship of indwelling unity with the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost; but there is no logical impossibility in such a change" (326). Still, there seems to be

3. See Donald W. Musser and David L. Paulsen, ed., *Mormonism in Dialogue with Contemporary Christian Theologies* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2007), 508–9, 538–41, 546–47.

a problem here. Ontological differences are differences of kind, or in the kind of being that one possesses, and therefore his argument is difficult to understand. It's like the old saying about being a "little bit pregnant." In his quest to assure kingship, Ostler seems to slide back into a kind of supernaturalism in which God's being is different from any other and can somehow change the creature's being from human to divine. Perhaps Ostler's vision of deification is closer to Eastern Orthodox notions of *theosis* than most Mormon versions of the divinization of humanity.

Ostler's understanding of kingship monotheism should become an important discussion in LDS theology. Ostler makes claims about deification because he thinks it is the heart of both the Bible and the scripture of the Restoration. He thus closes this volume with a final chapter, "The Scriptural Basis for the Doctrine of Deification." Whether readers agree or disagree with him about kingship monotheism, *Exploring Mormon Thought: Of God and Gods,* as well as Ostler's entire project, is very important for LDS theology.

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