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Reviewed by William J. Hamblin and Daniel C. Peterson

**The Evangelical Is Our Brother**

In the first paragraph of his introduction to *How Wide the Divide?*, Stephen Robinson recounts a story from his days as a graduate student at Duke University. When, having been invited, LDS representatives appeared at a citizens’ meeting called to combat the spread of local “adult” businesses, they were asked to leave because a party of conservative Protestant ministers threatened to walk out if Mormons were involved in the campaign. “So we withdrew,” Robinson recalls, “but the lesson was not lost on us—some Evangelicals oppose Mormons more vehemently than they oppose pornography” (p. 9).

We and many others have had similar experiences. Accordingly, we fully expected that the appearance of this book would provoke howls of outrage from enemies of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. And it has. Hostile reviews and book-length rebuttals and radio programs designed to immunize innocent Christians against *How Wide the Divide?* have sprung forth everywhere. A southern California operation called the “Simon Greenleaf Institute of Apologetics” sponsored a series of eight seminars from 23 February through 4 April 1998 collectively entitled “Mormonism and Christianity: How Great the Divide!” Professional anti-Mormon James White’s latest book, *Is the Mormon My Brother? Discerning the Differences between Mormonism and Christianity*, is to a degree an attempted rebuttal of *How Wide the*
Divide?¹ (Not surprisingly, White answers his question with a negative.) On one southern California “Christian” radio talk show, the discussion centered for at least a few moments on the possibility of suing Stephen Robinson and his church for the production of the book. From across the country come tales of plans to boycott InterVarsity Press, and of refusals by “Christian” bookstores to stock so evil a publication—“one of the most ill-conceived and dangerous books ever written.”² An anti-Mormon by the name of Jay Crosby, writing in The Evangel, writes approvingly: “Our local Christian bookstore operator—bless him—said he’d sooner carry Mein Kampf!”³

Many of the attacks on How Wide the Divide? from evangelical or fundamentalist critics have focused on Robinson, denying that he is truly representative of Latter-day Saint belief and even, in a number of instances, questioning his honesty and sincerity.⁴ He is “devious,” says the Rev. John L. Smith, who elsewhere calls him “infamous,” and his supposed misrepresentations of Latter-day Saint doctrine are “deliberate.”⁵

Robinson had already experienced such a reaction to his earlier writing and certainly anticipated a similar one to How Wide the Divide? “Our few conversations with other denominations,” he says,

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¹ See James R. White, Is the Mormon My Brother? Discerning the Differences between Mormonism and Christianity (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1997).
have usually been highly polemical, and both sides have exploited what the other says without actually attempting to discover what the other means. The Bible condemns this as making someone "an offender for a word" (Is 29:21), and I do not think it pleases God when it is done on either side.

Now along comes Prof. Robinson who tries haltingly to use the Evangelical idiom to state what the LDS really mean, and for this I am sometimes accused either of lying or of not truly representing traditional Mormonism—simply because my version sounds different than Brigham Young or Orson Pratt do when left "untranslated." But we do speak two different theological languages, and it does not do any good to object to what Brigham Young or Bruce McConkie said in the Mormon idiom without first translating this into what they meant in Evangelical terms. This has seldom, if ever, been done in the past, and until we learn to do it, we will never understand each other (p. 156; compare p. 163).

Robinson eloquently tells of his frustration when others inform him either (a) that he does not believe what he claims to believe or (b) that, if he does believe what he claims, it is because he is rejecting the teaching of his church (pp. 162–63). We too have encountered these responses and felt this frustration. Many anti-Mormon books bear titles like The Mormon Mirage and The Mormon Illusion, indicating what their authors regard as the misleading character of Latter-day Saint belief. A surprisingly large proportion of such publications, though, go beyond that, to allege deliberate deception on the part not only of church leaders but of ordinary missionaries and members. Titles like The Mormon Missionaries: An Inside Look at Their Real Message and Methods, Behind the Mask of Mormonism: From Its Early Schemes to Its Modern Deceptions, "What the Mormons Think of Christ REALLY . . . ," Exposing the Deceivers, and Unmasking Mormonism are depressingly common.

But a surprising number of Protestant critics have also assaulted Prof. Craig Blomberg of Denver Seminary (the evangelical coauthor of How Wide the Divide?), dismissing him as at best
naïve, probably incompetent, and almost certainly duped.\(^6\) Blomberg "begins his part of the debate by declaring that his wife's niece and her husband are Mormons," complains Rev. Smith. "Perhaps that was intended to make him an authority on the subject."\(^7\) The "so-called 'conversation' between authors Craig L. Blomberg and Stephen E. Robinson," announces Dennis A. Wright, of Oklahoma's Utah Missions, Inc., "was clearly 'won' by the Mormons!"\(^8\) (How one "wins" a "conversation" is not made entirely clear.)

We too will offer criticisms of *How Wide the Divide?* But we want our overall evaluation to be clear. This is an important book, and, by and large, a very good one. We agree completely that religious groups ought to be allowed to define themselves (pp. 12, 22), and this is a major step in that direction. Professor Robinson's expressed views, although certainly open to quibbles at this or that point, seem to us well within the Latter-day Saint mainstream. And Professor Blomberg, a fine New Testament scholar whose work elsewhere we have found very useful, turns in a more than respectable performance here. He is to be commended for the intelligence and competence of the argument he presents, as well as for his courage in undertaking the task. He forcefully advocates his position and certainly does not surrender to the Latter-day Saints (as a not inconsiderable number of his more fevered critics have claimed). In fact, he has probably offered the most coherent and attractive presentation of an evangelical Protestant position that has yet received significant Latter-day Saint readership. Craig Blomberg's evangelical views are being carried and sold in Latter-day Saint bookstores, and read and pondered by Latter-day Saints, as he formulated them, without mediation or caricature by unsympathetic Mormons. Moreover—and this represents a huge advance, a step of historic importance—the discussion between Professors Blomberg and Robinson is carried on in a spirit of seriousness and mutual respect. As Robinson puts it, "Professor Blomberg is the first Evangelical scholar I have known

\(^7\) Smith, "Those 57,000 Mormon Missionaries," 5.
of to examine the Latter-day Saints closely for any purpose other than where best to land a blow” (p. 12).

In this light, we cheer the joint call by Professors Robinson and Blomberg to retire the term cult from discussions about Mormonism (p. 193). That word is deeply offensive and insulting to Latter-day Saints, and, while we can certainly understand its utility in stigmatizing and thus marginalizing us, it is hardly conducive to respectful conversation or good community relations. What if, for example, certain groups of people found themselves labeled jerks, idiots, and imbeciles, and discovered that they were being discussed in books bearing titles like Confronting the Jerks at Your Door, Chaos of the Cretins, and When Idiots Ask? It would not help much for some self-proclaimed “Ministry to Morons” to explain—as many have attempted to do with the word cult—that no offense was intended, that they were using the term imbecile in a technical and very precise way to refer, say, to pretribulationists or to those who deny the gift of tongues. Why choose such a demeaning word? Few evangelicals would acknowledge themselves to be “cretins” even if a self-anointed expert on cretinism pointed out that the term derives originally from the late Latin christianus, meaning “Christian,” via the early French chrétien, and that she was using it in a clinical and dispassionate way as a theological term. And it would hardly soften the insult of the title When Idiots Ask were the author of that book to explain that he intended the original sense of the Greek idiotes (“a private person,” “an individual”), as a scientifically neutral way of describing those who hold to their own opinions instead of to the classical creeds. The insulting character of words like idiot, imbecile, and cult renders them useless for serious interfaith discussion.9

Unfortunately, though, from the vantage point of many of its critics, How Wide the Divide? allows the views of Stephen Robinson to be carried and sold in evangelical bookstores (at least, in those with the courage or determination to do so). This means that

9 Daniel C. Peterson and Stephen D. Ricks, “Mormonism as a ‘Cult’: The Limits of Lexical Polemics,” in Offenders for a Word: How Anti-Mormons Play Word Games to Attack the Latter-day Saints (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1992), 193–212, argue that the term cult should be abandoned altogether, as uselessly insulting and imprecise.
the opinions of an informed Latter-day Saint are being read by evangelical Christians without first being filtered and interpreted by professional anti-Mormons.

The reaction of the anti-Mormons points to one minor aspect of the book that we found occasionally irritating. Professors Blomberg and Robinson go out of their way, perhaps in a well-intentioned effort to avoid smug triumphalism, to lament the bias and misinformation on both sides of the Mormon-evangelical divide. And it is certainly true, as Robinson notes on pages 10–11, that there has been and is a great deal of mutual misunderstanding. Many Latter-day Saints entertain false notions about evangelical beliefs (p. 148). Mormons have sometimes used overly strong language to criticize evangelicals and their doctrines (p. 193). And, while this seems to us historically understandable, given what Latter-day Saints have endured at the hands of their fellow Christians, it is nonetheless to be regretted.

But *How Wide the Divide?* appears to say that guilt for the frequently tense relations between Latter-day Saints and evangelicals should be evenly distributed (as on pp. 10, 15, 22–23, 189).\(^\text{10}\) We find this very implausible, indeed objectionable. No Latter-day Saints make their living as professional anti-evangelicals. Latter-day Saints do not picket new Baptist churches, or broadcast against evangelical beliefs, or hold seminars in their chapels to critique Protestant theology, or publish books and pamphlets denouncing fundamentalists, or distribute films exposing the sordid facts about other denominations, or seek to exclude Calvinists from community interfaith associations, or boycott evangelical-owned businesses. There are no Latter-day Saint tabloids dedicated to fighting the Assemblies of God. We have never turned our church curriculum over to a multiweek discussion of the errors of the Southern Baptist Convention. Yet all of these things have been done, and are being done, to members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The situation is not symmetrical.

Blomberg tells of protests, picketing, stone-throwing, and a bomb threat that occurred during the open house and dedication of the Denver Colorado Temple, near his home, in 1986. On the

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\(^{10}\) Robinson may hint at an asymmetry on pages 11, 20.
other side, he reports that some apparently Latter-day Saint person or persons has stolen or damaged anti-Mormon books in Denver-area libraries (pp. 22–23). But the two actions scarcely seem equivalent. While we do not for a moment condone the destruction of library materials, the vandal’s attempt to silence anti-Mormon polemics was (misguidedly) defensive and nonviolent. The events at the Denver Temple, by contrast, were aggressive and overtly hostile to the beliefs of others.

Many of our other reservations are mere quibbles. We are mildly bothered, for example, by Robinson’s repeated insistence that Latter-day Saints accept and use the King James Version of the Bible. That is, of course, true. But he goes too far. “It would be nice,” he writes, “for Evangelicals to bear in mind that the King James Bible is the LDS Bible” (p. 59; cf. pp. 17, 64). We understand the point he is trying to make, of course, and it is a valid one: Mormons believe in the Bible, and, rather than using their own idiosyncratic, self-serving version of it, they tend to use versions widely accepted by other Christians around them. The King James Bible obviously occupies a special place in the history of the church, and it continues to be, by a long distance, the translation of choice for English-speaking church members and the one used in official English-speaking gatherings and publications. But Latter-day Saints are certainly free to use other translations of the Bible, and many do. Indeed, most Latter-day Saints now live outside of the United States, and very many of them speak languages other than English. Faithful members of the church also use the Lutherbibel and the Einheitsübersetzung and the Versión Reina-Valera and the Shangti and Hankul Bibles. This is a small point, but an important one.

Other reservations are more substantive. (Some of them demand more detailed treatment at a future time.) For example, Blomberg denies that the doctrine of the Trinity represents “an absurdity” and implicitly claims that it cannot be “demonstrated to contain logical contradictions” (p. 120). We are more persuaded, though, by an article recently published in the quarterly journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers, which answers the question “Has Trinitarianism Been Shown to Be Coherent?” with
a rather decisive No.\textsuperscript{11} We think that much if not all of what Blomberg claims for the unity of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost in the Trinity (as on pp. 98, 99, 117, 119–20, 122, 124–27) can be accounted for better and more coherently by a Latter-day Saint understanding of the Godhead. So, too, apparently, does Oxford’s Timothy Bartel. Upon rigorous analysis, he declares that the only logically tenable account of the Godhead is one in which “each member of the Trinity is absolutely distinct from the other two: the Trinity consists of three distinct individuals, each of whom is fully divine.”\textsuperscript{12} Furthermore, we think that a sensitive reading of both Latter-day Saint and mainstream Christian doctrine on the subject will discover surprisingly large areas of harmony. But when Blomberg writes that “It is hard to imagine anyone concocting the orthodox doctrine of a triune God, with all its complexities” (p. 126), we respond that the historical record is quite adequate to show how this happened and that it occurred on the basis of well-intentioned human attempts to make sense of certain scriptural statements in the light of particular philosophical and other presuppositions. Furthermore, his attempt to distinguish three separate “center[s] of . . . consciousness” in the Godhead, while denying that there are “three distinct personalities,” is unpersuasive (see pp. 99, 119). And it is difficult to see why, in contemplating the doctrine of the trinity, we should be more impressed with the alleged oneness of impersonal divine Being than with the “threeness” of the divine “centers of consciousness,” the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. For it is with these three that Christians interact. They pray to the Father, accept the atoning sacrifice of the Son, and receive the inspiration, guidance, and comfort of the Spirit. Divine Being itself provides no guidance, offers no comfort, grants no inspiration. Divine Being did not teach in parables on the hills of Galilee, or heal the synagogue ruler’s daughter. It offered no atoning sacrifice and, as such, listens to no prayers.


\textsuperscript{12} Bartel, “Plight of the Relative Trinitarian,” 151.
Nor, although we are sympathetic to his intention, are we prepared to agree without careful qualification to Robinson’s claim that, in the Latter-day Saint concept, God is not limited, finite, or changeable (pp. 78, 88, 92, 110). While such words should be carefully used, and while they can easily be misread (and will certainly be abused by our critics), they do seem to us to convey something important about the Latter-day Saint understanding of God. (Blomberg quite properly explains the “immutability” of God as referring to his “faithfulness in keeping his word” [p. 102]—a quality that, contrary to some understandings of the attribute, obviously does not prevent deity from interacting with our world of change and decay, nor even prevent him from entering this world and taking upon himself flesh and blood.)

Blomberg says, apparently intending it to count against Latter-day Saint belief, that finite beings can never, by themselves, become infinite (p. 105). But we know of no knowledgeable Latter-day Saint who would ever assert the contrary. His perception that Mormonism is “human-centered rather than God-centered” (p. 107) is untrue to our own considerable experience in the church, although it does, once again, point to an easily abused truth: Latter-day Saint belief is more “humanistic,” in the old and honorable sense of that term, than many other varieties of Christianity. (We regard that as a good thing.) As to Blomberg’s concern about Latter-day Saints collapsing “the distinction in essence between the creature and the Creator,” we plead guilty. But only if the charge is stated with precision and care. For, while Mormonism believes humans and God to be of the same genus or genus (as Acts 17:28 suggests), Latter-day Saints are acutely aware of the gulf that separates us from the holy, all-powerful, all-knowing, all-wise, perfectly benevolent, immortal, perfectly loving, inconceivably glorious creator of the cosmos.

On another matter, while Latter-day Saints, like their evangelical fellow-Christians, accept the fundamental historical reliability of the Bible and the essential accuracy of its depiction of the acts of God, we are not entirely sure that, as Blomberg and Robinson say in a joint statement (p. 75), we agree on inerrancy. Belief in biblical inerrancy seems to us something derived primarily and in the first instance from Protestant theological necessity, not from the evidence. Supporting evidence, including forced biblical proof
texts, is then sought to buttress the belief. But were it not for dogmatic and ecclesiastical imperatives, we very much doubt that any reader who came to the Bible for the first time would emerge from her reading alone with anything like a notion of scriptural inerrancy.

Blomberg finds that the remarkable ability of Latter-day Saint doctrine to answer questions makes it too neat, and therefore suspect (p. 108). But one could just as easily contend that its ability to solve problems and settle disputes indicates the divinity of its origin. We think, moreover, that he seriously misreads Joseph Smith's first vision when he says that it declares of the Christians in 1820 that "their religious worship [is] all a hypocritical pretense" (p. 184).

"Many Mormons," writes Blomberg, "are no longer claiming that [the Book of Abraham] is a literal translation of the papyri Joseph used, since Joseph Smith's translation of the Book of Abraham facsimiles has been challenged by Egyptologists" (p. 51) As evidence for this, he cites only the anti-Mormons H. Michael Marquardt and Franklin S. Spalding. But, of course, neither Marquardt nor Spalding was an Egyptologist, and we are confident that by far most communicant Latter-day Saints accept the historical authenticity of the Book of Abraham.

Blomberg rejects the Latter-day Saint notion of multiple heavens, but acknowledges that the idea of degrees of punishment in hell fits the Bible and makes logical sense (p. 174). Fine. We'll take that. Just as a glass can be half empty while being half full, the celestial and terrestrial degrees of glory can be counted as levels of punishment or hell rather than as gradations of heaven. For, compared to the celestial kingdom, that is precisely what they are. And that is actually what they are called in Doctrine and Covenants 76.

Blomberg is unwilling to accept the Latter-day Saint allegation of a massive apostasy from the primitive Christian church. "Christ promised to build his church so that the gates of hell would not prevail against it (Mt 16:19)," he writes. "It is hard to square this

promise with a total and prolonged apostasy of the Christian church that the LDS claims require” (p. 46). But the promise that hell would not prevail over the church certainly cannot be taken to imply immediate and uninterrupted victory, since we know that such has not been the historical case. (As a Protestant, Blomberg himself must believe that there has occurred at least some level of apostasy in Roman Catholicism and the churches of eastern Orthodoxy.) The only reasonable reading of the promise is to take it as an assurance of absolute ultimate triumph.

But over what was the early Christian church to triumph? Does Matthew 16:18 pledge that the church would not be overcome by evil? The word hell would seem to suggest as much. But the translation is misleading. The word rendered in the King James Version as hell is the Greek Hades. But Hades is not hell; Hades is merely the place to which human beings, both righteous and unrighteous, depart upon death. In the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament known as the Septuagint, Hades refers to “death” or “the grave,” and has no moral connotation whatever, for either good or evil. It is precisely equivalent to the Hebrew word Sheol, and to what Latter-day Saints term “the spirit world.” It is not evil, nor a place of evil, nor, as a whole, is it under the dominion of evil. In classical Greek, Hades was the name of the god of the underworld. He was a rather humorless deity, but he was never regarded as morally negative.

So, since the spirit world is all-admitting and thus ethically neutral, the promise recorded in Matthew 16:18 most likely did not intend to say that the powers of evil would not overcome the early church but that the powers of death would not overcome it. Moreover, the reference to the “gates” of the spirit world suggests that the power granted to the leaders of the church will extend past the portals of death. This promise is perfectly appropriate to the context, which describes the granting of priesthood sealing keys to the apostle Peter. Thus, it seems quite likely that Matthew 16, far from refuting Latter-day Saint belief in a “Great Apostasy,” supports the notion of priesthood ordinances for the dead as they are performed in Latter-day Saint temples around the world.

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14 As at 1 Samuel 2:6 (= Septuagint 1 Kings 2:6).
Throughout his essays, Blomberg makes a number of claims that he puts forward as historical evidence against the Latter-day Saint position, but which, upon close analysis, turn out to be essentially assertions of his theological position masked in the guise of argument based on historical evidence. We will examine only a few of the most significant of these issues, especially as they involve questions of canon and the scriptural texts.

“No ecclesiastical body or individual Christian,” writes Blomberg, “can make proclamations that are on a par with the authority of Scripture. . . . no church hierarchy, pope or anyone else has the right to add to, supersede or contradict the written Word of God as contained in [the Old and the New] testaments” (p. 33). But this attitude seems to be precisely that of the Pharisees and others living in Palestine in the early first century. They rejected Christ and the apostles on exactly the same grounds, in this regard, that Blomberg uses to reject Joseph Smith. Likewise, the Samaritans rejected Isaiah by means of the same argument, since for them the scriptural canon was closed with the prophet Moses. Regardless of whether Joseph Smith was or was not a prophet, this argument provides insufficient and inconsistent grounds for rejecting his revelations while at the same time accepting those of Isaiah, Jesus, and Paul. The rich irony here is that it was precisely the church hierarchy (including the “pope”)—whose authority in these and other matters Blomberg rejects—who established the canon that Blomberg now finds uniquely authoritative.

From the Latter-day Saint perspective, the heart of the matter is that, although Blomberg is correct in saying that “no ecclesiastical body or individual Christian can make proclamations that are on a par with the authority of Scripture,” this does not imply that God cannot make such proclamations. Joseph Smith’s message was that God is revealing new scripture, not that any man or church hierarchy is. If applied consistently, the rejection of Joseph’s revelations because they are the words of a man requires

15 See Bruce M. Metzger, The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); F. F. Bruce, The Canon of Scripture (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1988), provides an evangelical perspective that substantiates the fundamental role of the church hierarchy in deciding which books were and were not to be included in the canon.
an *a priori* assumption that precludes the possibility of ever accepting any new revelation from God, including that of the New Testament, since God’s word has always been revealed through human beings.

"None of the ancient manuscripts," says Blomberg, "support the contention that the type of ‘restorations’ that the JST (Joseph Smith’s translation) or the uniquely LDS Scriptures make were ever in the original biblical texts" (p. 36). "In every one of these passages," he says, "the JST significantly differed from the unanimous witness of the ancient manuscript evidence in favor of a version more in line with Mormon doctrine than historic Christianity" (p. 51). But all this would show, of course, is that the texts we now have are faithful to the scattered manuscripts of the late second century and thereafter. It cannot demonstrate anything about the mid-first-century originals, because these are lost. And if it be replied that ours is an argument from silence, and, thus, less than definitive, it must be pointed out that so, too, is Blomberg’s. But our position is less vulnerable than his. For it is conceivable, however probable or improbable, that manuscripts might someday appear that support all or most of the JST. However, it is virtually inconceivable that we will ever know all of the manuscripts and manuscript variants that have ever existed. But it is only on the basis of such complete knowledge that we could ever definitively rule out the possibility of ancient support for Joseph Smith’s readings. Furthermore, when Blomberg says, correctly, that “entire verses and chapters [in the JST] correspond to nothing in any ancient manuscript” (p. 51), this only counts against the Latter-day Saints if they are committed to the notion that the authority of the modern prophet Joseph Smith to make changes depends upon ancient texts. But Latter-day Saints are not (and should not be) committed to that notion.

Still, Blomberg is simply uninformed here.16 John Tvedtines has analyzed 265 variations between the King James Bible and the Book of Mormon, of which 89 (34%) have ancient textual sup-

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16 As will be noted as this review continues, Blomberg frequently seems uninformed about current LDS scholarly analysis on many of the issues he discusses. It is unfortunate that Stephen Robinson, his major LDS contact, apparently chose not to inform him of such studies.
Likewise John W. Welch has provided interesting examples and arguments concerning the Book of Mormon version of the Sermon on the Mount. Finally, again, informed Latter-day Saints do not claim that all of Joseph’s changes in the JST are necessarily textual in nature. To argue that there is no ancient textual support for such changes is therefore essentially irrelevant.

Blomberg doubts that we are lacking any important inspired texts from antiquity. “There is,” he writes, “not a shred of historical evidence from the ancient world that the suppression of such literature [the Book of Mormon’s ‘plain and precious things’] ever took place” (p. 49). “Neither,” continues Blomberg, “do any ancient manuscripts exist to support the claim that the early church left out entire books from the Bible that would have included distinctively LDS doctrine” (p. 36). But, of course, if a text has been successfully suppressed, one would expect evidence for it to be difficult, if not impossible, to find. When one considers the number of important literary texts from the ancient world that have disappeared leaving no trace behind them but their titles—treasured texts of Aristotle and Sophocles and the like, texts which were never suppressed but have nonetheless vanished—one is surprised that anything survives at all. And we have no way of knowing how many texts have disappeared leaving no trace at all. (It should be noted here, of course, that much Latter-day Saint doctrine is fundamentally the same as traditional Christian doctrine.)

In order to make his criticism coherent, Blomberg needs to provide specific examples of the “distinctively LDS doctrine” that he claims cannot be found in early Christian writings. Since

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he fails to do so, his criticism remains pure assertion. Moreover, in dealing with this issue it is centrally important to mention that most Jewish and Christian writings of the early centuries after Christ are simply lost. To claim that such lost documents did or did not include “distinctively LDS doctrine” is impossible (or, alternatively, very easy) because we simply do not know what they contained. Nonetheless, even in the surviving corpus of early Christian literature, there is extraordinarily rich evidence of early Christian beliefs that parallel “distinctively LDS” doctrines such as human deification,20 an anthropomorphic deity,21 creation from existing matter rather than ex nihilo, the premortal existence of the soul,22 and the central importance of the prophet Enoch,23 and such “distinctively LDS” practices as baptism for the dead24 and what might be termed Christian mystery rituals.25


23 See Hugh Nibley, Enoch the Prophet (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1986).

"We marvel," writes Blomberg, "at the extent of the agreement among the thousands of manuscripts that have been preserved, particularly in the Greek, and we believe that we have, in the critical Greek editions of the New Testament and the Hebrew and Aramaic editions of the Old Testament, extremely close replicas of what the original authors actually wrote" (p. 38). Unfortunately, though, this seems to be more a restatement of an article of evangelical faith than an accurate summary of the current state of the textual criticism of the Bible, which reveals quite a different picture. Blomberg seems to us to have too much confidence in the ability of textual criticism to get us back to what the original authors of scripture wrote (as at pp. 35–36). Here are some passages summarizing the recent assessment made by Prof. Emanuel Tov, a noted authority on the text of the Hebrew Bible:

- "All of [the] textual witnesses [of the OT] differ from each other to a greater or lesser extent." 26
- "There does not exist any one edition [of the OT] which agrees in all of its details with another." 27
- "Most of the texts—ancient and modern—which have been transmitted from one generation to the next have been corrupted in one way or another." 28
- "A second phenomenon pertains to corrections and changes inserted in the biblical text. . . . Such tampering with the text is evidenced in all textual witnesses." 29

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• “Therefore, paradoxically, the soferim [scribes] and Masoretes carefully preserved a text that was already corrupted.”

• “One of the postulates of biblical research is that the text preserved in the various representatives (manuscripts, editions) of what is commonly called the Masoretic Text, does not reflect the ‘original text’ of the biblical books in many details.”

• “These parallel sources [from Kings, Isaiah, Psalms, Samuel, etc.] are based on ancient texts which already differed from each other before they were incorporated into the biblical books, and which underwent changes after they were transmitted from one generation to the next as part of the biblical books.”

• “S[ępuaigrant] is a Jewish translation which was made mainly in Alexandria. Its Hebrew source differed greatly from the other textual witnesses (M[asoretic], T[argums], S[amaritan], V[ulgate, and many of the Qumran texts]). . . . Moreover, S[ępuaigrant] is important as a source for early exegesis, and this translation also forms the basis for many elements in the NT.”

• “The importance of S[ępuaigrant] is based on the fact that it reflects a greater variety of important variants than all the other translations put together.”

• “Textual recensions bear recognizable textual characteristics, such as an expansionistic, abbreviating, harmonizing, Judaizing, or Christianizing tendency.”

• “The theory of the division of the biblical witnesses into three recensions [Masoretic, Septuagint, and Samaritan] cannot be maintained . . . to such an extent that one can almost speak in terms of an unlimited number of texts.”

• “The question of the original text of the biblical books cannot be resolved unequivocally, since there is no solid evidence to help us to decide in either direction.”

30 Ibid.
31 Ibid., 11, emphasis in original.
32 Ibid., 12.
33 Ibid., 134.
34 Ibid., 142.
35 Ibid., 161.
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid., 166.
• "We still have no knowledge of copies of biblical books that were written in the first stage of their textual transmission, nor even of texts which are close to that time. . . . Since the centuries preceding the extant evidence presumably were marked by great textual fluidity, everything that is said about the pristine state of the biblical text must necessarily remain hypothetical."38

• "M[asoretic] is but one witness of the biblical text, and its original form was far from identical with the original text of the Bible as a whole."39

• "As a rule they [concepts of the nature of the original biblical text] are formulated as ‘beliefs,’ that is, a scholar, as it were, believes, or does not believe, in a single original text, and such views are almost always dogmatic."40

• "During the textual transmission many complicated changes occurred, making it now almost impossible for us to reconstruct the original form of the text."41

The evidence he has examined leads Tov to conclude that "many of the pervasive changes in the biblical text, pertaining to whole sentences, sections and books, should not . . . be ascribed to copyists, but to earlier generations of editors who allowed themselves such massive changes in the formative stage of the biblical literature."42 There are a number of examples of this. The Septuagint (LXX) and Qumran versions of Jeremiah are one-sixth shorter than that of the Masoretic text, and the order of the verses has been changed.43 (Changing the context, of course, can change the overall meaning.) Likewise, the LXX version of Joshua is 4–5 percent shorter than the Masoretic text.44 The same is true for Ezekiel.45 The story of David and Goliath is 44 percent shorter in the Septuagint.46 The chronological information in Genesis 5, 8, and 11 is quite different between the Samaritan

38 Ibid., 169.
39 Ibid., 170.
40 Ibid., 171.
41 Ibid., 177.
42 Ibid., 265–66.
43 See ibid., 320–21.
44 See ibid., 328.
45 See ibid., 333.
46 See ibid., 334–35.
Pentateuch, the LXX, and the Masoretic traditions.\textsuperscript{47} The eleventh chapter of 1 Samuel is much longer in the Qumran version than in the Masoretic.\textsuperscript{48}

There is a final important point to make. "It is not that M[asoretic text] triumphed over the other texts, but rather, that those who fostered it probably constituted the only organized group which survived the destruction of the Second Temple [i.e., the rabbinic schools derived from the Pharisees]."\textsuperscript{49} Thus, while we can agree that we have a fairly well-preserved textual tradition of the Masoretes, this tradition preserves only one version of the Old Testament—that accepted and edited by the rabbis following the second century A.D., after the completion of the New Testament.

But the greatest irony in Blomberg's claim that "the Hebrew and Aramaic editions of the Old Testament [are] extremely close replicas of what the original authors actually wrote" (p. 38) is that the New Testament authors evidently did not have access to that text. Rather, they generally quote not from the modern editions of the Hebrew Old Testament, which Blomberg lauds as being so close to the original, but from the Septuagint Old Testament, which, as noted above, differs extensively from the Masoretic text, which forms the basis of our modern edition of the Hebrew Bible.

Given all the textual differences manifest in the Samaritan, Septuagint, Qumran, and other pre-second-century A.D. textual traditions, it seems impossible to claim that the Masoretic version represents the original text of the Hebrew Bible dating six or seven centuries earlier. The LDS position on this matter—that the biblical texts have been significantly changed, both inadvertently and intentionally—is sustained by the weight of the evidence of textual criticism.

And the textual problems in the New Testament are often as vexing as those of the Old. For example, says the noted authority Bruce Metzger, the "Western text of Acts is nearly ten percent longer than the form which is commonly regarded to be the

\textsuperscript{47} See ibid., 337.
\textsuperscript{48} See ibid., 342–44.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 195.
original text of that book."\textsuperscript{50} Metzger further notes that, "of the approximately five thousand Greek manuscripts of all or part of the New Testament that are known today, no two agree exactly in all particulars."\textsuperscript{51} The classic example is, of course, the famous problem of the lack of Mark 16:9–20 in the earliest manuscripts.

A recent study on New Testament textual criticism provides a number of interesting conclusions:

- "They [ancient methods of rhetorical interpretation] are used to reveal a secret code, only accessible to the learned or initiated. If the ‘Western’ text is seen from this perspective, it becomes less of a product of a certain theology than of a certain system of meaning. . . . But this sophisticated kind of coded writing is not suitable for general circulation. For wider distribution, the text had to be adapted to the mentality of the people who were going to receive it, it had to be revised and changed so as to make it acceptable to an audience who were not expecting to have to look for hidden meaning."\textsuperscript{52}

- "The wide stylistic gap between the two main New Testament text types, the ‘Western’ on the one hand and all the other types on the other hand, cannot have arisen by chance."\textsuperscript{53}

- "In AD 178 the secular writer Celsus stated in polemic against the Christians: ‘some of the believers . . . have changed the original text of the Gospels three or four times or even more, with the intention of thus being able to destroy the arguments of their critics.’ (quoted in Origen, \textit{Contra Celsum}, SC 132, 2, 27). Origen does not deny the existence of such changes."\textsuperscript{54}

- Indeed, Origen wrote, "It is an obvious fact today [third century A.D.] that there is much diversity among the manuscripts, due either to the carelessness of the scribes, or to the perverse audacity of some people in correcting the text, or again to the fact

\begin{footnotes}
\item[51] Ibid., xxiv.
\item[53] Ibid.
\item[54] Ibid., 96.
\end{footnotes}
that there are those who add or delete as they please, setting themselves up as correctors."\textsuperscript{55}

- "It is therefore not possible to reconstitute with certainty the earliest text, even though there is no doubt about its having existed in written form from a very early date, without a preparatory oral stage."\textsuperscript{56}

- "In the period following AD 135, the recensions proliferated with a resultant textual diversity which reached a peak before the year 200."\textsuperscript{57}

- "Thus between the years 150 and 250, the text of the first recensions acquired a host of new readings. They were a mixture of accidental carelessness, deliberate scribal corrections, involuntary mistakes, a translator's conscious departure from literalness, a reviser's more systematic alterations, and, not least, contamination caused by harmonizing to an extent which varied in strength from place to place. All these things contributed to diversification of the text, to giving it, if one may so put it, a little of the local colour of each country."\textsuperscript{58}

In conclusion, like the Masoretic Old Testament, the text of the New Testament that can be reconstructed by textual criticism is but one version of the text which existed in the third century. Except for a few fragments, we don’t know and cannot reconstruct the text of the first century.

Blomberg insists that "no point of orthodox doctrine hinges on disputed texts, but we want to get as close as possible to God’s inerrant Word, even in translation" (p. 38). However, this is not the conclusion of Bart D. Ehrman, who, after a lengthy study offering numerous examples, summarizes his position as follows: "My thesis can be stated simply: scribes occasionally altered the words of their sacred texts to make them more patently orthodox and to prevent their misuse by Christians who espoused aberrant views."\textsuperscript{59} We shall discuss only a few cases of this phenomenon.

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., citing Origen, \textit{In Matthaeum} 15.14, in \textit{PG} 13:1293.

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 97.

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 98.

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 105–6.

\textsuperscript{59} Bart D. Ehrman, \textit{The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), xi.
Blomberg himself recognizes that 1 John 5:7 is an interpolation (i.e., a forgery) (see p. 50), but seems unwilling to consider the implications of this fact.\textsuperscript{60} Where else in the New Testament does it state that the Holy Ghost is one with the Father and Son? Is the lack of such an explicit statement not a serious doctrinal omission from the New Testament? Is it not a "point of orthodox doctrine [which] hinges on disputed texts"?

Another rather stunning example comes from the Old Testament. "The *tiqqúné sôperîm* [a type of theological interpolation] are corrections of the text aimed chiefly at softening anthropomorphisms and eliminating the attribution of any sort of impropriety to God."\textsuperscript{61} Here we find the removal of anthropomorphisms from the biblical text for theological purposes—the transformation of the doctrine of God from anthropomorphic to nonanthropomorphic. This is precisely the type of thing that Latter-day Saint Christians claim happened, but which Blomberg claims never happened. And it is precisely in regard to an LDS Christian doctrine—the anthropomorphic character of God—which Blomberg claims is not sustained by the Bible.

In the Masoretic text, Deuteronomy 32:8 says that God divided the earth up in some fashion according to the "sons of Israel." But 4QDeut\textsuperscript{4} and LXX 848, 106c have "sons of God"—a variant which Tov and many others feel is "probably [its] original wording."\textsuperscript{62} Such a reading supports the Latter-day Saint notion of God as the Father of many children, and substantially weakens biblical support for the mainstream Christian view of God as isolated in stark and lonely monotheistic splendor.

"Significantly," writes Blomberg, "Protestantism, Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy all agree on the same twenty-seven books for the canon of the New Testament" (p. 39; emphasis deleted). But, although this is true, it is hardly a decisive argument in Blomberg's favor, nor against the Latter-day Saints (since we too accept the same canon for the New Testament). But each of these three branches of mainstream Christianity derives from the

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[60]{See Metzger, \textit{Textual Commentary}, 715–17.}
\footnotetext[62]{Tov, \textit{Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible}, 269.}
\end{footnotes}
imperial church of the fourth century, which expelled those Christians who rejected the canon that it was attempting to impose by government edict and force of arms. The similarities in the New Testament canon thus represent merely three branches of a single tradition of canonicity, rather than three separate denominations of Christianity—three independent witnesses—accepting the same New Testament canon. The real issue concerns some of the eastern branches of Christianity: The Syriac Peshitta lacks 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and the Apocalypse. The Armenians include 3 Corinthians, and did not accept the Apocalypse until the twelfth century. The Coptic church includes two epistles of Clement. The Ethiopian church diverges most widely, adding the Sinodos, Clement, the Book of the Covenant, and the Didascalia.63

“The New Testament never once demonstrably refers to any of the Apocryphal Old Testament books,” says Blomberg (p. 40). But this is really quite an astonishing claim, considering the vast number of allusions and quotations to apocryphal and pseudepigraphic works found in the New Testament. The editors of the Nestle-Aland edition of the New Testament provide references to several hundred allusions and quotations in an appendix, including references to 3 Esdras, 4 Esdras, 1 Maccabees, 2 Maccabees, 3 Maccabees, 4 Maccabees, Tobias, Judith, Susanna, Bel and the Dragon, Baruch, the Epistle of Jeremiah, Sirach, and the Wisdom of Solomon from the deuterocanonical or apocryphal works, and Jubilees, the Psalms of Solomon, Enoch, the Apocalypse of Baruch, the Assumption of Moses, and six of the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, all found among the Old Testament pseudepigrapha.64 Most important in this regard is Jude 1:14–15, which is a quotation of 1 Enoch 1:9. While one is certainly free to argue that citation of a Jewish work does not demonstrate that the New Testament author recognized that work as “canonical”—especially since there is no evidence of the idea of a canon among

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63 See Metzger, The Canon of the New Testament, 219–23 (Syriac), 225 (Coptic), and 226–27 (Ethiopic).
New Testament writers, and they cite several pagan sources as well—to argue that such citations simply don't exist is preposterous.

Attempting to block the possible canonicity of the Book of Mormon, Blomberg cites a rule used by the imperial Christian church to determine such questions and then draws from it a corollary. “The third major criterion employed by the earliest church,” he says, “was widespread usage as a divinely authoritative source of doctrine. . . . No work of any Jewish or Christian pedigree, however authentic, that was hidden from the world at large for centuries should ever qualify as Scripture” (p. 44). However, if Professor Blomberg wishes to apply this principle consistently to scripture he must necessarily excise the books of Daniel and Deuteronomy from the Bible. For the Lord ordered Daniel to “seal the book, even to the time of the end” (Daniel 12:4; cf. 9:24, 12:9). If the book of Daniel we now have is this sealed book, it was apparently sealed and hidden away for at least three hundred years (until the second century B.C. when we have the earliest evidence of the text). On the other hand, if Daniel’s sealed book is still to come forth in the last days, Blomberg will be ill-advised to ignore its contents merely because it has been “hidden from the world at large for centuries,” for that is precisely what the Lord commanded Daniel to do. Likewise, it appears that at least a substantial part of the book of Deuteronomy was sealed in a chamber in the Temple of Solomon for centuries and was revealed to the people only around 620 B.C. (see 2 Kings 22:3–20; 2 Chronicles 34:3–18). Yet Deuteronomy is accepted by Jews and Christians as divinely inspired and binding on the community, and is quoted by Christ himself as authoritative.65

There are also a large number of lost texts referred to in the Old Testament as authoritative.66 If a manuscript of one or more


66 See, for example, book of the wars of the Lord (Numbers 21:14); book of Jasher (Joshua 10:13; 2 Samuel 1:18); book of the acts of Solomon (1 Kings 11:41); book of the chronicles of the kings of Israel (1 Kings 14:19); book of the chronicles of the kings of Judah (1 Kings 14:29; 15:7); book of Samuel the seer (1 Chronicles 29:29); book of Nathan the prophet (1 Chronicles 29:29; 2 Chronicles 9:29); book of Gad the seer (1 Chronicles 29:29); book of
such texts were to be found, would we be obliged to reject it out of hand simply because, for several millennia, it had been lost? Blomberg should not be allowed to indulge in the double standard of permitting Daniel and Deuteronomy to remain in his biblical canon, while rejecting the Book of Mormon on the grounds that it—like Deuteronomy and Daniel—was sealed and hidden away for centuries.67

With regard to the Book of Mormon, Blomberg confides that "the more I read [in it], the more I feel it to be the product of nineteenth-century religious fervor, however well intentioned" (p. 183). However, he seems to be unaware of the great quantity of evidence, some of which we consider quite impressive, that seems to indicate an ancient origin for the Book of Mormon. For example, he calls attention to the "Mormon-Evangelical debate" as to whether there "truly was such a language as 'Reformed Egyptian'" (p. 53), but betrays no knowledge of Latter-day Saint scholarship on the issue.68 On the positive side, Blomberg acknowledges that the Bible shares in the same kind of "contradictions" and archaeological problems that critics often point to in the Book of Mormon (pp. 46-47).

Blomberg is perplexed at Joseph Smith's apparent mistake in naming the land of Jerusalem as the birthplace of Jesus Christ. "I have no idea why he allowed this discrepancy to stand," says Blomberg (p. 46), especially in view of the fact that Joseph was "well versed in the KJV" (p. 49). (On page 51, he implicitly describes Joseph Smith as "a creative, biblically literate individual.") But, as has been pointed out in this Review many times, there is no evidence to suggest that the early Joseph Smith was

67 It should be noted that the other major reference to a sealed book in the Bible is Isaiah 29:11, which Latter-day Saint scripture sees as a prophecy of the Book of Mormon itself (2 Nephi 27).

“well versed” in any version of the Bible and there is considerable evidence to the contrary. Furthermore, scholarship on the subject suggests that Alma 7:10, far from constituting a mistake, reflects authentically ancient Near Eastern usage.69

Blomberg thinks that the Book of Mormon is anachronistic. “The whole range of issues that the uniquely LDS Scriptures seek to answer fits perfectly the spirit of the early nineteenth century,” he writes. As examples, though, he lists only infant baptism, the status of “the people in the Old Testament times who seemed to know so little of the gospel,” predestination, and original sin, claiming that they “all fit the religious climate of nineteenth-century North America very readily” (p. 52). And they probably do. But they also fit many other periods of biblical and Christian history. Original sin and predestination, for instance, were major sources of contention between Augustine and Pelagius in the early fifth century, and in the years leading up to the Second Council of Orange in A.D. 529. Tertullian and the Anabaptists rejected infant baptism in, respectively, early third-century North Africa and sixteenth-century Germanic Europe, which would seem to indicate that controversy on the subject is not limited to “nineteenth century North America.” And as for concern with the fate of the unevangelized, which is a very hot topic among Christians today—including evangelicals—it is very difficult to imagine a period when it has not been a concern for those involved with or encountering the proselytizing, exclusivist faith of Christianity.70 Latter-day Saints have occasionally repeated a story told by the

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historian J. L. Motley about the near-conversion of the Frisian chieftain Radbod in the late seventh century:

It was Pepin of Heristal, grandson of the Netherlander, Pepin of Landen, who conquered the Frisian Radbod (A.D. 692), and forced him to change his royal for the ducal title. It was . . . Charles the Hammer, whose tremendous blows completed his father’s work. The new mayor of the palace soon drove the Frisian chief into submission, and even into Christianity. A bishop’s indiscretion, however, neutralized the apostolic blows of the mayor. The pagan Radbod had already immersed one of his royal legs in the baptismal font, when the thought struck him: “Where are my dead forefathers at present?” he said, turning suddenly upon Bishop Wolfran. “In hell, with all other unbelievers,” was the imprudent answer. “Mighty well,” replied Radbod, removing his leg, “then will I rather feast with my ancestors in the halls of Woden than dwell with your little starving band of Christians in heaven.” Entreaties and threats were unavailing. The Frisian declined positively a rite which was to cause an eternal separation from his buried kindred, and he died as he had lived, a heathen.71

In an effort to undercut the plausibility of any modern claim to revelation, Blomberg attempts to draw a distinction between the Old Testament and the New Testament in order to argue that, even if prophecy can be shown to have existed in the period immediately following the ministry of Christ, it was of a fundamentally different character from that of the original Hebrews. Prophecy was on its way out, he implies, and the kind of prophecy that produces written, canonizable texts was definitely gone. “In the days of Isaiah and Jeremiah, for example,” he says, “no divinely accredited prophets were ever to be evaluated; their messages were

simply to be believed and obeyed. In Paul’s day, however, such evaluation becomes mandatory (1 Cor 14:29)” (p. 42). This seems, however, to be untrue. Deuteronometry 18:20–22, for instance, which claims to have been written well before the time of Isaiah and which came forth publicly, as we have noted, precisely during the time of Jeremiah, outlines a test by which claims to prophecy were to be evaluated. So Blomberg’s distinction does not hold.

“What is more,” Blomberg avers, “[in New Testament times] genuine revelations from God could be misinterpreted by those who received them in ways that made the actual prophecy and its (mis-) interpretation difficult to distinguish. . . . what these Christians put forward as a word from the Lord was a combination of genuine revelation and faulty human interpretation. So even if God does still grant prophecies today, we must never treat them as if they were on a par with inerrant Scripture, because they may not get to us in an inerrant form” (p. 43). But why would this ever have been different, even in Old Testament times? And why is a text that has been transmitted and changed over 2,000 years more inerrant than the words of a living prophet? “The record of revelation,” Robinson cogently points out, “cannot logically be more authoritative than the experience of revelation” (p. 58). Weren’t the original biblical texts revealed to or written down by humans? Aren’t they still subject to human misinterpretation? (If not, how does Blomberg explain the Latter-day Saints?)

“In the era beginning with the apostles,” says Blomberg, “prophets almost never added to Scripture. So even if we could demonstrate that Joseph Smith were a prophet, we should not have any high degree of expectation that he would ever write Scripture” (p. 43). Perhaps not. And, in fact, many of the modern prophets (e.g., Howard W. Hunter, Ezra Taft Benson, David O. McKay, Lorenzo Snow, and others) have never formally produced scripture. But the fact that many prophets have not added to scripture is a very weak basis on which to suggest that another specific prophet will not, or even that he may not. Furthermore, Blomberg appears to be committing a semantic equivocation between the term prophes in a narrow academic sense, and prophet in the sense used by Latter-day Saints, according to which the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy (Revelation 19:10).
For Mormons, all the early apostles and authors of the New Testament were prophets, and the authors of the New Testament all clearly, by definition, added texts or revelations to the canon. It is true that many of the prophets and apostles of the New Testament (e.g., Thaddeus, Agabus, and Nathanael) did not produce scriptural texts, but, for that matter, neither did many of the prophets of the earlier testament (e.g. Nathan, Micaiah, Elijah, and Elisha).

Blomberg correctly notes that there is a "general Evangelical aversion to admitting any new revelation, because to do so is to diminish Christ" (p. 45, emphasis in the original). We cannot see, however, why additional communication from God (including the personal guidance many Christians often seek—and find—in prayer) should be seen in any way as "diminish[ing] Christ." "Once God revealed himself in Jesus," asks Blomberg, "what need is there for further revelation?" (p. 45). On this, we can only say, Ask the early Christians! For the New Testament is replete with revelations granted after the life, death, and resurrection of the Savior—Paul's writings, for example.

Blomberg says that "(1) theological consistency with earlier revelation and (2) being produced during the apostolic era by someone closely associated with Jesus or the apostles" are necessary to meet his standard of orthodoxy and apostolicity for scripture (p. 43). But this hardly helps to settle the question of how the canon of scripture is to be determined and whether the Latter-day Saint scriptures can be admitted to the canon, since it begs the question: Those who rejected nonapostolic revelation won the ecclesiastical debates and became the imperial church, but it is precisely their legitimacy, and their authority to do so, that the Latter-day Saint notion of the "Great Apostasy" casts into doubt.

Blomberg's criteria for canonicity (pp. 39–45, 69) are non-biblical and therefore—especially coming from someone who sees the Bible as the only valid religious authority—not wholly persuasive. He says that new revelation must be consistent with old, as the New Testament is consistent with the Old (p. 41). But surely many Jews would have disputed that, on issues such as early Christianity's dropping of the requirement of circumcision or its taking the gospel to the gentiles. That is why there was resistance on these questions even within the early church. And many modern Jews—and not a few scholars—would forcefully dispute Christian read-
ings of the messianic prophecies in the Hebrew Bible. Robinson is entirely justified in pointing this out (on p. 70).

Much, much more could and will be said about the issues raised in this important book. The conversation preserved in *How Wide the Divide?* is a pioneering one, and much remains to be accomplished. As Robinson puts it:

LDS terminology often seems naive, imprecise and even sometimes sloppy by Evangelical standards, but Evangelicals have had centuries in which to polish and refine their terminology and their arguments in dialogue with other denominations. We Mormons have not been around nearly as long, and we have no professional clergy to keep our theological language finely tuned (thank heaven!). (p. 156; compare p. 13).

We agree with both the description and the expression of gratitude. But there are other factors that might be noted. To considerable though varying degrees, Protestant and other forms of mainstream Christianity draw their doctrine and their authority from a deposit of faith laid down in documents from the past, and a precise understanding of those documents is essential to enable them to remain faithful to that ancient deposit. Latter-day Saints, while treasuring such ancient scripture as the Bible, the Book of Mormon, and much of the Pearl of Great Price, see the guarantee of their fidelity to the will of God very much in the presence of living apostles and prophets in the church. Doctrinal authenticity and proper practice are ensured far less by careful scholarly scrutiny of ancient documents than by what Latter-day Saints accept as continuous revelation.

Mormons have much to do to learn to speak in the language of their Christian brothers and sisters, so as to promote future dialogues. (By contrast, our mainstream Christian friends have an almost impossible task, to win over the opponents of such dialogue. In fact, sad experience suggests to us that many of those opponents cannot and never will be convinced that mutually respectful conversation between Latter-day Saints and other Christians is anything but an evil snare. It may be simpler and more productive simply to proceed, even over their vociferous objections.) In learning that language, we shall have to be quite
careful. For translating from one language into another often—indeed, almost invariably—distorts. Meaning is lost, and undesired meanings and connotations are unavoidably acquired. Using categories that do not spring natively from the subject but have been derived elsewhere, inevitably, if subtly, modifies the substance. (The use of Latin—or, at least, of Indo-European—grammatical categories to describe Arabic is finally disappearing, for instance, as scholars have recognized the inaccuracies inseparably attendant upon such an approach.)

But the skill is well worth learning, for the dialogue is important and the issues are vital.

Blomberg refers to Pascal’s famous suggestion regarding religious debates, according to which one must ask, “Which one of us has more at stake? What if I am wrong, and my dialogue partner is right? On the other hand, what if I am right, and my dialogue partner is mistaken?” He suggests that the proper Pascalian “wager” in the dispute between evangelicals and Latter-day Saints is to bet on conservative Protestantism. For, he says, if the Latter-day Saints are right, sincere albeit mistaken evangelicals will still go to the (very pleasant) terrestrial kingdom, there to enjoy the presence of Jesus Christ, the divine Son of God. On the other hand, he continues, if evangelical Protestantism is correct, the sincere but mistaken Latter-day Saints will suffer in hell for all eternity.

It is a cogent, if rather unaspiring, position to take. Those who sincerely reject the fulness of the gospel as Latter-day Saints have received it will almost certainly not go to the deepest abyss of hell. But they will also, it seems, have to forego the highest blessings of the Father and the Son.

There are other ways of applying Pascal’s logic here. If the Latter-day Saints are correct, little that is crucially important to evangelicals is lost. The Bible is true, the ancient prophets and apostles were what they claimed to be, and such luminaries of Christian history as St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Francis of Assisi, Søren Kierkegaard, C. S. Lewis, and Mother Teresa remain admirable models of serious, morally engaged thinking and Christian discipleship. And there is still hope for our evangelical brothers and sisters, as well as for those of our brothers and sisters who have lived and died in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam.
By contrast, if evangelical Protestantism is correct, much that is vitally important to Latter-day Saints is lost. Our deceased families and friends are being tortured in hell. Our leaders are, at best, self-deceived fools, and very possibly monstrous frauds. And, on the usual Protestant understanding, billions of our non-Christian brothers and sisters are consigned forever to the flames of the inferno. It is difficult to see how any normal person could find much in this unendurable scenario to feel cheerful about.

Few issues could conceivably be more urgent, or more significant in the long term. Accordingly, we heartily concur when Blomberg calls for “a serious and courteous discussion between informed and scholarly representatives of Evangelical and Mormon traditions” (p. 25). “We hope,” he says, “that we can spark many similar conversations between Mormons and Evangelicals and thus inaugurate a new era in which such conversations move us beyond the impasse of previous polemics, recognizing our areas of agreement and clarifying the nature of our disagreements” (p. 32).

But such conversations must be carried out in a spirit of mutual respect and sincere desire to perceive and communicate the truth, rather than to win cheap points based on rhetoric and distortion. As Robinson notes, “it is a rare thing indeed for non-Mormons writing about the Saints to get it right even when they are trying to, and most contemporary non-LDS writing on the Mormons is frankly not trying to get it right” (p. 14). Reflecting on the challenges involved in producing How Wide the Divide? itself, Robinson observes that “if two individuals who hold doctorate degrees in religion and who are honestly attempting to get at the truth experience difficulty understanding each other, what chance do polemicists have of correctly understanding or representing the beliefs of the other side?” (p. 12).

We hope that this commendable book will be the first of many such ventures—in print, in the broadcast media, in academic symposia, and in ordinary communities across our nation and around the globe.