

PREFACE

This book is the first in a three volume series *Exploring Mormon Thought*. The first volume, *Exploring Mormon Thought: The Attributes of God*, deals with the Mormon concept of God. The second volume, *Exploring Mormon Thought: The Problems of Theism*, deals with the problems of Christian theism, including the problems of petitionary prayer and whether it can make sense in the context of a God who has absolute foreknowledge or who controls everything, the problem of evil, the problems of atonement, the problems of original sin and so on. These first two volumes are in the analytic tradition of philosophical theology. These first two volumes are addressed primarily to non-Mormons and Mormons who are interested in having a dialogue regarding Mormonism as it relates to traditional theology.

The third volume is radically different. As the name implies, *Exploring Mormon Thought: A Fire on the Horizon*, is a departure from theology as it has usually been done in the Christian tradition. It is not in the analytic tradition. Although I draw on philosophers such as the Hasidic German philosopher Martin Buber, Danish existentialist philosopher Soren Kierkegaard and French Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, among others, this work is not really in any existing tradition. Indeed, my style is precisely a break with all previous types of philosophy and theology to better embody the break of Mormonism with prior theological traditions. This work engages in what I call “revelatory discourse” as a means to more faithfully speak to persons within the faith.

This book was not written to be a book. It began and remained notes written to myself to clarify issues for my own edification. Later, I set out to do a simple article that clarified the Mormon concept of God for responsible theologians, philosophers and professionals outside the Mormon religion. I say “responsible” because it appears that any dialogue that takes Mormonism seriously will always be rejected by certain professional “anti-Mormons” who really don’t care what Mormons have to say about what they actually believe. Such persons are not open to listening, and so it is a waste of time talking to them. I want to dialogue with those who are willing to listen.

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The article expanded into a book because I realized that to carry on the dialogue in a responsible manner, it would be necessary to be more careful to define the issues and terms involved. My primary goal was to define the essential attributes of God in a way that would allow a competent discussion of Mormon Christology to go forward, for it is here that the Mormon view is most pronounced both in its differences with classical theology and its contributions to a meaningful and coherent view of God in the Christian tradition. The Mormon view of God is really driven wholly (and also “holy”) by its commitment to the fact that Jesus Christ is the complete revelation of God. He did what He saw the Father do. He is the perfect image of the Father. All of the discussion, the logical principles, the arguments, the speculation and scriptures come down to this simple fact: as Jesus is, so is the Father; as Jesus and the Father are, so we may also be.

As I elucidated the Mormon view, it became clear to me that seeing “God” as merely an individual divine person who progressed in some respects was entirely inadequate to capture what Joseph Smith and the scriptures say. It thus became necessary to distinguish between the individual divine persons and the Godhead. Now when Mormons are criticized for their view of God by well-meaning Christians (and many who are not so charitably disposed), a confusion immediately arises because, when traditional Christians speak of God, they usually mean the “Trinity” as a whole and Mormons mean the Father or the Son. Thus, we speak past each other due to the equivocation. The purpose of this book is to allow us to talk to each other with love and mutual respect. I do this by clarifying the terms and the issues involved in the different views of God.

I also want to make clear that I have some misgivings about the analytic tradition as a vehicle to dialogue regarding Mormonism. My primary concern is that the tradition treats “God” as a mere object of analysis and, by its very nature, misses the essential importance of having a relationship with individual divine persons who are one God. Persons cannot be analyzed. Focus on one “attribute” of a person to the exclusion of others necessarily freezes a person as a static object when, in reality, each person is a dynamic mystery in the process of creation. Such analysis in its very mode of discourse seems to preclude interpersonal interaction with the wholeness (holiness) of persons. However, I will not say more about

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this dilemma until my third volume—except to say that I regard the analytic mode of dialogue as essential *between persons belonging to different religious traditions to the extent their traditions are not shared.*

I want to thank Dr. David Paulsen whom I regard as my mentor, friend and colleague. He is in every sense of the word a true Christian. I have been honored to know and work with him. He has given many useful responses to the manuscript. A manuscript of this book was finished in 1990 and used in his honors philosophy of religion course at Brigham Young University during the spring semester of 1990. I also want to thank the students in that class who made useful criticisms and asked insightful questions. However, I should make clear that the text was “finished” prior to use in the class. The book sat dormant for a decade before I was approached by Greg Kofford regarding the possibility of publishing the book.

This book is essentially the book completed in 1990. However, I have endeavored to update it based on recent developments. I could make many more changes, but I have focused on those which I deemed most important. After all, the issues I discuss go back as far as the first century of the common era and have been with us since. It is unlikely that a few years will make much difference in the issues or the arguments.

There are others who have had many discussions with me regarding the issues in the book, including Mark Gustavson, Dennis Potter, Peter Appleby, James Faulconer, my brothers Craig, Jeff and Kurt and my sisters Connie and Michelle, among many others. I also want to thank my parents whose secure love made it possible for me to never worry about the basic needs of existence and freed me to engage in philosophical flight. I want to thank them for their patience and charity. It has been my honor and privilege to be in relationship with them.

I especially want to thank my wife and children. My wife, Christine, is simply the most decent person I know. She inspires me to be my most magnificent. My children, Carina, Corey, Jacob, David and Chersten are lights in my life. Without their support this book could not have been written. Thank you. I dedicate this book to them.

Blake Ostler
2001