

Godbodied

The Matter of the Latter-day Saints

Stephen H. Webb

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A Necessary Dialogue

Vigorous and vibrant religious dialogue is rare these days. The very word *dialogue* suggests a perfunctory grade-school exercise of “show and tell” that too frequently and predictably ends up with saccharine platitudes and generic pieties. This is unfortunate for Christianity, because the Christian faith has always grown through intellectual clashes and vigorous disputes. In the early church, heretics—those close enough to traditional Christianity to really get underneath the skin of its foundational beliefs—were the ones who challenged the orthodox. Today, that role should be played by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, whose members are more popularly known as Mormons. No other religious movement lies so close to traditional Christianity while speaking, at times, in such a vexing yet enchanting voice. When I began listening to what Mormons say about their beliefs, I was astounded by what I heard. Mormonism speaks straight to the heart with the clearest of proclamations about the believer’s longing for intimacy with Jesus Christ.

Mormonism can be a controversial topic for many non-Mormon Christians, but I have come to the conclusion that no theology has ever managed to capture the essential sameness of Jesus with us in a more striking manner. At the heart of Mormon cosmic optimism is the idea that the incarnation of Jesus was not an afterthought to creation or a contingent response to an

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As a professor of religion and philosophy at Wabash College in Crawfordsville, Indiana, I am a newcomer to Mormon Studies. I set out a couple of years ago to recover an obscure heretical position on the nature of Jesus Christ and ended up developing a deep interest in and admiration for the thought of Joseph Smith. When I started researching what I call Heavenly Flesh Christology, I quickly found that there is very little information about it. Only occasionally mentioned in scholarly histories of the early church, who actually taught it, what it really means, and why creedal theologians were so opposed to it are matters of much mystery and dispute. One thing, however, is clear: defenders of Heavenly Flesh Christology believed that Jesus Christ was eternally embodied in some way and that he brought his material substance with him when he became incarnate on the earth. The more I looked into this position, the more I found traces of (or at least some precedent for) the theology of Joseph Smith. The loosely related ideas that God is essentially embodied, that Jesus Christ has a history that extends backward into the aeons, and that spirit and matter are not absolute opposites can all be found in early Christianity and are all developed in remarkably prescient ways by Smith.



Making these connections has led me to spend many hours pondering Mormon metaphysical beliefs. I think the potential for mutual understanding between Mormon and creedal Christians is unlimited, and that both groups have much to learn from each other about how to best praise the name of Jesus. I look forward to continuing to think about Smith's theological depths for years to come.

accidental fall of humanity into sin. Christ embodied is the center of the cosmos; he lived as we do before we were created to be like him.

Of all the branches of Christianity, Mormonism is the most imaginative, and, if nothing else, its intellectual audacity should make it the most exciting conversational partner for traditional Christians for the twenty-first century. Studying Mormonism is like looking into a mirror that, upon closer inspection, turns into a maze. Keep exploring and the maze leads to multiple exits, each of which opens onto hauntingly familiar rooms that comprise unexpected additions to the mansion of faith.

Mormonism is a mirror because it departs from traditional theology most radically only when it is trying to do justice to the honor and glory of Jesus Christ. I have noted how Robert Jenson laments the way theologians all too commonly resist thinking through all of the implications of the claim that “Jesus is Lord.”¹ In affirming the divinity of Jesus, Mormons are Christians who do not know where to stop. They answer the question of whether it is possible to say too much about Jesus with a resounding “No!” Indeed, never has a religious movement combined so effortlessly the most extravagant assertions with the most level-headed and commonsensical tone. Mormon rhetoric is guided by the conviction that the only way to say enough about Christ is to say too much.² As a result, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints puts Jesus Christ front and center in ways that would make many members of mainline Protestant denominations blush. Mormon theology is Christology unbound—extremism in defense of Christology that can appear eccentric only to those who think that understatement is a virtue.

For that very reason, however, Mormonism is also a maze. Bluntly put, Mormons do not play by the rules of the Nicene Creed. Their theological arguments can look like a form of cheating when, in reality, they are trying to change the way the game is played. Mormonism is like an alternative reality come to life—a counterfactual history of post-Nicene developments of pre-Nicene theology, the ultimate “what if” theological parlor game. What if Tertullian had been more successful in his explication of the materiality of the soul? What if the monks of Egypt had won their battle in defense of anthropomorphism? What if Augustine had not read the books of the Platonists? Mormonism invites creedal Christians into a world where everything is slightly but significantly skewed from what they are used to. It is as if you are hearing stories you had never heard before about someone you love and thought you knew perfectly well. Better put, it is as if you had discovered another branch of your family that you did not know existed. For most non-Mormon Christians (I will call them traditional or creedal Christians in this chapter), suspicion of Mormonism runs so high that taking Mormonism seriously requires something like an intellectual if not

spiritual conversion. Indeed, part of the problem is that conflict between estranged relatives can be more heated than arguments among strangers. Only a movement so close to traditional Christianity could incite such strong feelings.

From the standpoint of religious dialogue, interpretations of Mormonism are complicated by the question of whether Mormons can even be said, in David Paulsen's words, to "do theology."³ Without an established clergy or a class of professional theologians trained in divinity schools, it can be difficult at times for an outsider to get a feel for what is essential and what is peripheral to the Mormon faith. Where doctrine begins and ends in Mormon thought is often hard to say. Beliefs that are common to Mormon experience are not necessarily Mormon doctrines. Moreover, as part of the nineteenth-century restorationist movement, Mormons mistrusted the early Christian creeds, with their tidy logic and philosophical terminology, but among the restorationists Mormons stood out with their trust in visions, and visions are always hard to translate into systematic terms. Besides, Mormonism is committed to progressive revelation and an ongoing office of prophecy, so the incomplete nature of its doctrines is built into it from the very beginning. With more truth yet to be revealed by the President of the Church, who is recognized as having the power of the Old Testament prophets, how can Mormonism propound a systematic theology?

Perhaps the most complicating factor for creedal dialogue with Latter-day Saints is that Mormons, unlike other restorationists, were not content to flounder in suspicion of the way the early Church absorbed Greek metaphysics. Instead, Mormons put the Platonization of Christianity at the heart of their critique of the ossification and corruption of Christianity. Something went terribly wrong after the age of the Apostles, they argue, and that something has to do with the theological turn toward a metaphysics of immaterialism. Far from ignoring early church history, then, Mormons are committed to an interrogation of the relationship of theology to philosophy that objects to nearly every development that led to the ecumenical creeds. They do not just raise objections, however. It is as if, as they follow the road orthodox theologians took to the creeds, Mormons pause to pick up the detritus that was jettisoned along the way. They recycle these discarded beliefs into a shining, novel creation of their own.

Mormonism is still a young branch of Christianity, which would make it unfair to press it for theological completeness even if it did not have a doctrine of ongoing revelation. Nonetheless, there are many—and their numbers are increasing—Mormon scholars, intellectuals, writers, scientists, philosophers and, yes, theologians willing and eager to explicate Mormon doctrines. There is so much discussion about Mormon beliefs in books,

articles, and on the web that it is no exaggeration to suggest that Mormonism is ready to be discovered by the rest of the Christian world and that its exploration will be the next great adventure of creedal theology.

Much of the burgeoning discussion of Mormonism centers, paradoxically, on its metaphysical commitments. For a religion without many professional theologians and deeply suspicious of academic philosophy, Mormonism is very specific about its metaphysical commitments while, at the same time, profoundly expansive in its trust of the religious imagination. Theological and philosophical critics of Mormonism often focus on their rejection of the doctrine of creation out of nothing, as if the Mormon relationship to traditional theology is merely negative. What critics miss is the flip side of this rejection, namely, the affirmation of the eternity of matter and how this affirmation functions as the philosophical foundation for a dramatic revision of the pre-existence of Jesus Christ.

Indeed, one way of thinking about Mormon Christology is to see it as an attempt at remythologizing the gospel story. Throughout the twentieth century, liberal theology turned Jesus into a moral example, the ultimate doer of good deeds, while conservative theology has often responded by doing the same thing, only changing the content of those deeds from social justice to personal responsibility. The gulf between the two groups has widened due to liberal skepticism about the reliability of the Gospels and conservative insistence on their literal truthfulness. In response to these ceaseless and frequently arid debates, there have been calls for the development of a cosmic Christology, especially from environmental theologians struggling to make Christianity relevant for global perspectives on the future of the earth. Still, too much theology today is beholden to historical guesswork that keeps Jesus bound by the written page. Seen in this light, Mormonism unleashes a squall of fresh air on the question of who Jesus Christ really is.

An example of this phenomenon is Robert Millet, a professor at Brigham Young University and one of the best and brightest defenders of the Mormon faith. More than an apologist, however, he is a creative thinker who challenges creedal Christians to be more true to the implications of the eternity of Jesus Christ. Family metaphors dominate Mormon discussions of Jesus, as when Millet calls him “the first-born spirit child of God.”⁴ Jesus Christ and humans are members of one family because they are made of the same basic stuff, which is the eternal substance of divinity. Families are meant to be together forever in Mormonism, and there is no greater bond than our familial relationship with Jesus.

Jesus Christ and human beings partake of the same eternal properties, but they share in those properties in different ways. Jesus Christ has the priority, which is why, Millet explains, Mormons call him “our Elder brother.”⁵

This language sounds like it could be a classical example of subordinationism, that is, the subordination of the Son to the Father, thus rendering Christ a secondary or inferior God, which also runs into the problem of polytheism. More generously interpreted, Mormonism takes a strongly social view of the Trinity, seeing each member as an independent or relatively independent person, a position that is not uncommon among many creedal Christian theologians today. Their independence is relative because, as Millet explains, Latter-day Saints “believe they are infinitely more one than they are separate.”⁶ Indeed, they enjoy a transcendental unity of divine indwelling that serves as a blessed state that all of God’s children can hope to attain.

Mormonism arrives at its unique interpretation of the relationship of the one to the three in God through a reinterpretation of the nature of the divine substance. If the divine substance is simple, as we have seen, then it is beyond number, except that we can say it is one in the sense of being indivisible. This raises difficult questions for the doctrine of the Trinity. For Mormons, divinity is not invisible, simple, and immaterial, which means that it can take different forms without losing its essential unity. This redefinition of divinity also means that the particular forms the divine substance takes are not unchanging. Jesus Christ, for example, has a history before his absolute equality with God, which sounds strange to creedal ears. Millet tries to soften the inevitably negative reaction by insisting that “when he was God, he was God.”⁷ What he was doing before that time is hard even for Mormons to say. Millet, rightly or wrongly, tries to downplay the practical implications of the mind-boggling nature of Mormon Christology. “To what extent does it truly matter whether Jesus was always God or at a certain point in the pre-mortal realm he became God?”⁸ It probably does not matter much to everyday faith and ethics. It certainly does not matter to evangelism, because Mormons take the Great Commission more seriously than most creedal Christians.⁹ For the pursuit of truth, however, the consistency of this position needs careful scrutiny. Christocentricity here has an infinite depth, it seems, and a breadth to match—to the point of theological eccentricity perhaps, but does it cross the line and leave behind traditional Christianity altogether?

From the perspective of classical metaphysics, of course, little of Mormon doctrine makes much logical sense. The idea of a radically plural and finite divine substance, however, just might have its own logic as well as its own religious and ethical advantages. At the very least, the fluidity and materiality of the Mormon view of God enables it to capture the essential sameness of Jesus Christ with us in a most striking manner. Mormons go so far as to insist that God was once a man just like us, which can sound confusing, but it is, in a way, the flipside to the belief that we will become, in the afterlife, just like him. There is a grand and cosmic circularity that connects Jesus with

humanity, and it never stops rolling, like a dance with countless changing partners and yet everyone always comes around to dancing with him.

Christ has never been *logos asarkos* (the Word without form or the divine voice without body). If this is theological error, it is on the side of excess rather than deficiency, resulting in an immoderate Christology born out of a surplus rather than an insufficiency of faith. It puts creedal Christians in the odd position of saying that Mormons make too much of Jesus Christ. Is such excess really a vice?

By now it should be clear how narrow-minded the charge is that Mormonism is a modern version of Arianism. A better analogy, if we must try to find an ancient precedent for this most American of Christian movements, can be made to Heavenly Flesh Christology. Mormonism is evidence that perennial conceptual possibilities in any intellectual framework or system are never completely shut down, no matter how much history leaves them behind. Roads not taken can be not only rediscovered but also broadened and paved for new uses. For me, Mormonism raises the hypothetical question of what would have happened if the best theological minds had dedicated themselves to explicating all of the implications of the heavenly flesh position. Even this analogy, however, is difficult to make, not only because Mormonism is a hybrid of so many historical influences but also because Mormonism is so radically (and intentionally) out of step with church history. One of the amazing things about Mormonism is that it transgresses most theological categories as well as the standard account of the history of theology. Consequently, we cannot simply turn back the clock to try to find a place and time where we can locate Mormonism in order to make it look familiar. Comparing Joseph Smith to Arius, who denied the Son's equality with the Father, or, better, Eutyches, an early defender of Heavenly Flesh Christology, is not an unproductive thought experiment, but it misses the point that Mormonism demands a rethinking of classical theism from the ground up and thus a retelling of the Christian story from the Gospels forward—and the ground upon which it erects its speculations is as earthy as it can be.

Eternal Matter without Pantheism

Mormonism is not the return of Eutyches, but it just might be a form of Christianity deprived of the influence of Augustine. This is true in a variety of ways, but I will just note two. First, Mormonism's optimistic view of humanity puts it firmly on the side against Augustine's doctrine of original sin. Second, Augustine was very suspicious of any attempt to read the apocalyptic signs of the times or to bring together the kingdom of God with the kingdom of man. He interprets the thousand years of the earthly kingdom (Rev. 20) in his *City of God* as a symbol for the Christian era,¹⁰

which led him to have a fairly guarded attitude toward any attempt to bend history toward the will of God. One of the consequences of his rejection of apocalyptic speculation, as Brian Daley explains, is his insistence that “the time for meriting reward or punishment from God is ‘here and now,’ not in the time after death.”¹¹ If the souls of the dead do benefit from the alms and prayers of the living, he writes in the *Enchiridion*, it is only those souls that “during their lives earned such merit.”¹² He is firm on this point: “No one, then, need hope that after he is dead he shall obtain merit with God which he has neglected to secure here.”¹³ By drawing a sharp metaphysical line between the immaterial and the material, he also drew a soteriological line between this life and the next (a line that was deepened by the Protestant reformers). Consequently, Augustine could not imagine how we could be embodied in heaven in a way that parallels our spiritual and moral growth on earth. Is it any coincidence that Mormons, who have the most materialistic metaphysics of the divine, also have the most vivid, detailed, and dynamic portrait of spiritual progress in heaven?

The Mormon suspicion of Augustine actually goes much deeper than these examples indicate. Built into Latter-day Saint theology is a firm conviction that some of the power of the gospel message was lost with the Hellenization of Christianity. Mormonism emerged in the environment of restorationist theology, led by Alexander Campbell and others who thought the early Church was corrupted by the centralizing power of the bishop of Rome. The restorationists wanted to purify the Church to meet the needs of the new world. The goal for Campbell, the father of the Disciples of Christ denomination, was to raise the foundations of the Church to the higher ground of commonsense rationalism. Campbell thought that a pragmatic approach to philosophical problems and theological differences could unite Christianity as it spread across the American frontier. Mormons took a much different track. With the same boldness of Martin Luther’s disdain for the Aristotelianism of the medieval schoolmen, Joseph Smith dismissed the Platonism of the early Church Fathers. Campbell wanted to use commonsense rationality to streamline and update the faith; he labored for a more efficient and adaptable theological program. Smith wanted to reinvigorate Christianity by releasing it from the stranglehold of an alien and imposing set of philosophical assumptions. He was unafraid of theological complexity and thus patiently followed each of his religious insights to their logical conclusion. The boldest of his insights was given to him in a vision he received in 1820, near Palmyra, New York. Mormons call this the First Vision, and, as David L. Paulsen has demonstrated, by 1838 it was interpreted by Smith and his followers as a charter for affirming divine embodiment.¹⁴

Just as it is easy but mistaken to get carried away by Luther's rhetoric and imagine him putting an end to medieval thought with an absolutely novel beginning, it would be a mistake to think of Mormonism as simply rejecting the Greek heritage of metaphysics. Paulsen has done more than any Mormon thinker to demonstrate how Smith's idea of divine embodiment would have been in the theological mainstream prior to Origen and Augustine. In fact, Paulsen, who is also a professor at Brigham Young University, has done more than any theologian of any denomination to rediscover the metaphysical depths of anthropomorphism in early Christian theology, and his work has been extremely helpful for my own project. Paulsen shows how the Mormon version of the restoration of the Church requires a strong reading of the history of metaphysics. Joseph Smith spoke plainly, but that should not disguise the revolutionary nature of his claims. I have discussed emerging ideas of matter in the context of the Neo-Platonists, the Gnostics, and the early theologians, and Smith would have held his own in debating with all three groups.¹⁵ Smith had the imagination of the Gnostics in his multilayered portrait of the divinities that populate the cosmos. Nonetheless, he would have agreed with the Neo-Platonists and the Christians that the Gnostics erred in identifying matter with evil. He would have liked the Platonic concept of pre-existent souls as well as Plato's portrait of the Demiurge as being not absolutely different from the world.¹⁶ Indeed, his sense of the rhythmic and cyclical movement of spirits from a refined to an embodied state and back again would have led him to express great interest in the circular framework of Plotinus, but Smith would not have accepted the elitism and intellectualism built into Neo-Platonic thought. He would have sympathized with Christians who struggled to identify nature's inherent goodness, but he would not have shared their solution in attributing infinity to God. Smith absorbed and revised so many Christian traditions, but negative theology has virtually no room in his thought. In the debates over infinity, Smith, ever the concrete thinker, would have affirmed an actual, as opposed to a potential infinity in order to defend his vision of the afterlife as an eternal progression through space and time. His cosmos was big enough for both the eternity of the divine and the infinity of matter, but his materialism left no room for one entity that is both eternal and infinite. In sum, he would have de-Augustinized theology in order to baptize Greek philosophy anew.

In fashioning his own Christian metaphysics, it should be no surprise that Smith raises a set of conundrums as intractable as any that befuddle traditional metaphysics. Francis Beckwith has been one of the most astute critics to point this out. Beckwith begins with the presupposition that orthodox theologians used metaphysical speculation to explicate God's uniqueness, so that Augustine and company never adopted Greek philosophy indiscriminately.

He also rightly insists that the question is not whether theology should use metaphysics but which metaphysics does the best job of explicating Christian faith. Beckwith is a defender of the Platonist tradition in theology, so he thinks Mormons bet on the wrong horse, but that in itself is not sufficient reason to reject Mormon speculations. Beckwith shows how Mormon arguments deserve to be examined on their own grounds for internal consistency and biblical adequacy. Not being Platonic is not equivalent to not being rational.¹⁷

Rightly or wrongly, Christian theologians have long connected the rational, orderly, and knowable character of the world with the doctrine of creation out of nothing. God's infinity is the reason for matter's finitude. The consensus of the Church Fathers held that any blurring of the line between God and matter threatened both God's freedom and matter's status as finite and thereby knowable. Classical theism sought to maintain God's essential otherness and matter's predictable nearness. Mormonism, in a way, stands this project on its head. Mormonism is willing to risk making God much more knowable (much more like us) than traditional theism allows while treating matter as a source of endless surprises and fantastic permutations. Matter is unpredictable and impenetrable, while God is as familiar as you or I. For Mormons, a God who is less than infinite leaves room for matter that is much more than dead weight.

Augustine is the classic example of a theologian who thought the world was rational, orderly, and knowable only if it was created by a transcendent God who stood beyond all that we know. He thought that if God did not create the world willfully, then physical substance would be a force as eternal, powerful, and mysterious as God himself (and thus result in metaphysical dualism, which he himself entertained in his Manichaean years). Likewise, if God created the world willfully but out of his own substance, then the world would be a necessary part of God's being (and thus result in pantheism).

Augustine's position is actually not as sound as it first appears. If God makes the world out of himself, does it necessarily have all the attributes of the divine? Does it necessarily follow that matter is a substance that equals God's own power? The problem with Augustine's position (and the whole of classical theism on this issue) is that he can imagine no middle ground between creating and shaping. From the perspective of classical theism, if God does not create matter out of nothing, then God merely shapes (or adds form to) the matter that is already there, and that means that God is neither infinite nor omnipotent. If matter is too close to God, then God must not have complete mastery over it. Likewise, if matter comes from God, then God must be tainted by it, which means that God shares in its corruptibility. Either way, God would not be God, or at least, God would not be infinite. But what if there is a middle ground? What if matter is one

of God's perfections without the world being divine? If the perfection of matter is already an expression of who God is (indeed, if it is the substance of the Father's relation to the Son), then matter can come from God without compromising God's nature. Moreover, God would be neither master nor victim of matter's nature, since God's relation to matter would be nothing more than a reiteration of the Father's relation to the Son.

Augustine worried about pantheism at a time when pagan practices were still a real threat to the Christian Church. Now that the pagan gods are long gone, one might wonder if his worries are still so pertinent. True, much of the environmental movement is inspired and guided by pantheistic assumptions, even when those assumptions are not recognized or made explicit by the advocates of a green theology. It also needs to be admitted that there are problems inherent in pantheism that make Augustine's rejection of paganism a living testament that has not lost all of its relevance today. Nevertheless, the pantheism of New Age or green theology is of a different kind from the pantheism of ancient Roman paganism. Today's pantheism is an attempt to rethink nature in the shadow of Christianity's decline, but not its complete absence. History cannot be reversed. A pagan pantheism with no overtones of the Christian doctrine of creation is not a conceptual possibility, unless a complete and abrupt rupture with all of Western history were to occur.

Even in its attenuated green form, however, pantheism poses a problem for Christians, if for no other reason than that it detracts from the central significance of the drama of the very human life of Jesus Christ. The question is whether the eternity of matter is necessarily implicated in the way that pantheism focuses on the divine in nature in general and not the divine in the nature of Jesus. The answer to that question depends on how the divine substance is conceived. For classical theists (as we saw with Aquinas), the divine substance is simple and unchanging, yet it is not so simple and unchanging that it does not accommodate the Father begetting the Son and their love producing the Holy Spirit. Classical theists explain how simplicity and relationality come together in God by arguing that these Trinitarian relations are eternal and thus simply are what the divine substance is. God is this unchanging set of dynamic relations. If these relations are truly dynamic, however, then it is incredibly difficult to conceive of how God is unchanging—and that is where heavenly flesh becomes interesting to contemplate.

From the perspective of classical theism, if the Son is enfleshed prior to the incarnation, then either (a) he must always have been enfleshed or (b) he must have been given a body as the first instance of God's creation of matter. (It makes little sense to think of the Father giving the Son a body after creation but before the incarnation.) The less troubling of these choices

for classical theism is (b), since it keeps intact the essential immateriality of the divine while helping to explain how Jesus can be the foundation of the world and elected by God before time began. Much of what I have said on this topic could be defended from the standpoint of (b), but (b) is the most minimal form of Heavenly Flesh Christology. The more ambitious claim is (a), because it challenges theologians to rethink the concept of God's nature as well as the nature of matter. If the Father really gives something to the Son that distinguishes them, then isn't that something necessarily what we call "matter"? And if matter is merely an addition to the divine nature of the Son, then isn't it really irrelevant to what they share and thus relegated to a secondary status? Perhaps so, if the divine substance is indivisible by definition and anything that is divisible is comprised of matter and form, but that is the very premise Heavenly Flesh Christology calls into question. Classical theism pushes Heavenly Flesh Christology into the following either-or: Either the body the Father gives the Son is created out of nothing, in which case we have position (b), or that body is eternally divine, in which case we have position (a), which entails the further position that matter is both eternal and divine. But what if that body came from the Father without being identical to the divine essence? In other words, what if the divine substance is such that the Father can grant form to the Son without creating something entirely new? Obviously, if this were the case, the divine substance and the nature of matter would have to be entirely different from how classical materialism conceives of them. If God is neither immaterial nor material, or if matter is one of God's perfections, which admittedly means that matter is not what we think it is, then the Father's gift of a body to the Son can be eternally what God is, and that body can be the source and origin of not only human bodies but also of all material objects whatsoever. It would follow that God creates the world out of himself, not from nothing, but the world would not be simply an extension of the divine substance. The world is really something new in the life of God, an accompaniment to the bodily gift the Father gives the Son, and thus it cannot be identified in a crude way with what the Father and the Son already are. *Matter as we know it has a beginning, an origin, in Christ, but matter as it can be, in its perfected form, is eternally an attribute of the divine.* In this way, the eternity of matter can be conceived without falling into the trap of pantheism, and this possibility, I am convinced, is precisely what Joseph Smith saw, even if he did not put it into these words or this theological context.

The Mormon Church stakes its whole theology on the coherence of the idea that God formed the world from a material substance that is not totally unlike his own divine nature. That makes Mormonism either a religious oddity in Western history or an utterly crucial metaphysical correction

to our understanding of the role and value of matter in God's creation of the world. At the very least, Mormonism presents a prod to theological thought at the precise time when materiality is more central to public awareness than ever before. Our relationship to the material world, whether it goes by the name of environmentalism, ecology, sustainability, or evolution has never been so urgently pressed before us as today. To respond to this urgency, we need not only an ethic but also a metaphysics of matter. We cannot know how to treat matter unless we know what it is, and the nature of matter has to include but ultimately go beyond the specificities of science. We need to know what matter is for, where it comes from, and to what extent it is identical to what we are. Those are the central questions of our time, and creedal Christians can answer them only in a self-critical and mutually beneficial dialogue with Latter-day Saints—and that dialogue has to begin with an assessment of the life and thought of Joseph Smith.

Evidence That Demands Our Amazement

By any measurement, Joseph Smith was a remarkable person. His combination of organizational acumen with spiritual originality and personal decorum and modesty is rare in the history of religion. He was so steadfast in his ability to inspire men and women through times of great hardship that none of those who knew him could claim to fully understand him. He knew more about theology and philosophy than it was reasonable for anyone in his position to know, as if he were dipping into the deep, collective unconsciousness of Christianity with a very long pen. He read the Bible in ways so novel that he can be considered a theological innocent—he expanded and revised the biblical narrative without questioning its authority—yet he brusquely overturned ancient and impregnable metaphysical assumptions with the aplomb of an assistant professor. For someone so charismatic, he was exceptionally humble, even ordinary, and he delegated authority with the wisdom of a man looking far into the future for the well-being of his followers. It would be tempting to compare him to Mohammed—who also combined pragmatic political skill and a genius for religious innovation—if he were not so deeply Christian.

Visions, interpreted literally, appear to have driven his corporeal and anthropomorphic understanding of God. Take, for example, a revelation he had in 1830, after he was harassed by a mob and twice hauled into court. Significantly, the revelation does not address his legal battles or the precarious state of his finances. Instead, Smith's focus is on God. What he sees—which is recorded in the first chapter of his *Book of Moses*—is a new version of the story of Moses meeting God face to face. God addresses Moses as “my son” and tells him that “thou art in the similitude of mine Only Begotten; and mine

Only Begotten is and shall be the Savior.”¹⁸ Several features of Smith’s theology are on display in this text. Smith has a fully embodied understanding of how we are created in the image of God. We are all the Father’s sons because we are all not just like God but actually similar to him. We *resemble* him. Moreover, Smith thinks it perfectly natural that the Old Testament prophets were told explicitly about Jesus Christ. Jesus does not just make his entrance in the incarnation. He is as present and active in the Old Testament as in the New. Smith also has a sophisticated understanding of divine corporeality. Moses says that “my own eyes have beheld God; but not my natural, but my spiritual eyes.” Whatever God is made of, there is still a significant difference, even if it is only one of gradation, between the spiritual and the material. Finally, God talks about the many worlds he has made, and says that there is no end to his works, which is evidence of how deeply tuned Smith was to an advanced understanding of cosmology from the beginning of his ministry.

Subsequent visions deepened but did not depart from these basic features of his thinking. In 1832, Smith recorded a revelation that is known as the “Olive Leaf,” because he called it “the olive leaf which we have plucked from the tree of paradise.” Richard Bushman, in the best biography of Smith, says of this document that “nothing in nineteenth-century literature resembles it,” and he is surely right.¹⁹ Following the Gospel of John, Smith calls Christ the light of the world, but he takes this metaphor in a decidedly metaphysical direction. This is the light, he says, “which is in all things; which giveth life to all things; which is the law by which all things are governed: even the power of God.”²⁰ Smith identifies Jesus Christ not only with God but also with both the eternal power that fuels the cosmos and the laws by which that power is regulated. Everything radiates with the energy of Jesus. This is truly the beginning of a Christological metaphysics of matter.

A materialistic worldview flowed naturally from the way Joseph Smith thought and lived. Bushman observes how casually he uttered the famous statement he made to a Methodist preacher: “There is no such thing as immaterial matter. All spirit is matter but is more fine or pure and can only be discerned by purer eyes. We can’t see it but when our bodies are purified we shall see that it is all matter.”²¹ He transferred to metaphysics the subjective turn that Luther’s quest for salvific certainty took. While Luther’s “Here I stand” put the emphasis on the “I,” Smith put the emphasis on the ground beneath his feet. Physical matter is so trustworthy and good that it is capable of taking innumerable forms in countless worlds, each with their own spiritual drama. That is the best way, I think, to understand his increasing commitment to a kind of polytheism. Far from reverting to paganism or simply falling into sloppy thinking, Smith was carrying his confidence in Christ to its fullest possible expression. Bushman emphasizes

the unusual degree to which he “had little sense of the flesh being base.”²² All things are possible not only for us but also for God, in that this universe does not exhaust the divine creativity. The universe is not big enough to hold the majesty of God’s ingenuity. Rather than reacting negatively to the apparently infinite expansiveness of the universe, Smith called astronomy’s bluff and multiplied the universe by the same expansive factor. Smith was wiping the theological slate clean of the Neo-Platonic metaphysics that had so influenced Augustine.

Matter has infinite folds and unbounded depths, but it always evolves toward the form of Christ, which is our form too. One of the sections (section 130, dating to 1843) from *The Doctrine and Covenants*, the official collection of the revelations given to Joseph Smith, states simply, “When the Savior shall appear we shall see him as he is. We shall see that he is a man like ourselves.” The ease with which Smith speaks the language of anthropomorphism surely stems from the self-confidence of one who knows himself to be made in a holy form. This section goes on to reject the idea that the Father and the Son dwell in our hearts. Smith does not pretend to know in exact detail where God is or what God looks like, but he is clear that the Father occupies space and the Son has a face not unlike our own. There is a part of God that is able to pervade earthly matter, but that is what Smith calls the Holy Ghost. “The Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man’s; the Son also; but the Holy Ghost has not a body of flesh and bones, but is a personage of Spirit. Were it not so, the Holy Ghost could not dwell in us.” The Holy Spirit is the most immaterial of the divine persons, and yet even the Holy Spirit takes a personal form.

Finally, there is Joseph Smith’s most famous address, the King Follett Sermon. It was given April 7, 1844, to twenty thousand people gathered for the funeral of Smith’s close friend, Elder King Follett. The context is crucial and frequently overlooked. These are words of consolation, not systematic theology. Taken out of that context, no matter how often you read them, they can sound astonishingly strange:

God himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens! That is the great secret. If the veil were rent today, and the great God who holds this world in its orbit, and who upholds all worlds and all things by his power, was to make himself visible,—I say, if you were to see him today, you would see him like a man in form—like yourselves in all the person, image, and very form as a man; for Adam was created in the very fashion, image and likeness of God, and received instruction from, and walked, talked and conversed with him, as one man talks and communes with another.²³

Notice that Smith couches his great insight, which is that God was once as we are now, in a conditional form. He says we would know this if he were to make himself visible, which implies that his form is ordinarily invisible

to earthly eyes. The material of his divine nature is thus both similar and dissimilar to the stuff of which we are made.

That God was once man means that “God came to be God.”²⁴ Smith recognizes that this is a puzzling concept, and he wishes that he “could tell the story in such a manner that persecution would cease for ever.”²⁵ He tries to speak plainly even as he knows that his revelations will sound peculiar, but the premise of his argument is fairly simple. What Jesus does is not alien to the Father. They both have the same power, and they exercise it in the same way. So what did Jesus do? “The answer is obvious—in a manner to lay down his body and take it up again.”²⁶ Smith does not mean that the body of Jesus does not really belong to him. He is referring to Christ’s death and resurrection. Divine power consists of the mastery of life and death—the power to create, to suffer and sacrifice for others, and to become greater in the process. Since we participate in that power, eternal life is a matter of learning “how to be Gods yourselves, and to be kings and priests to God, the same as all Gods have done before you, namely, by going from one small degree to another, and from a small capacity to a great one; from grace to grace, from exaltation to exaltation, until you attain to the resurrection of the dead, and are able to dwell in everlasting burnings, and to sit in glory, as do those who sit enthroned in everlasting power.”²⁷ Divinization never looked so real.

Two corrections of common misrepresentations of Smith’s theology need to be made at this point. First, Mormons are often charged with denying the efficacy of grace and thus making salvation dependent upon the exercise of the individual’s free will. All theologians use the language of effort, reform, and growth, so this is not a fair charge, at least concerning this passage. In any case, Smith describes the process of sanctification as being “from grace to grace.” Rather than replicating Pelagianism, Smith is siding with that aspect of the Christian tradition best represented by Thomas Aquinas, which says we can and must cooperate with divine grace in order to permit it to actualize our potential for divinization. Second, even though Smith says that believers will become gods, he also says that they will be kings and priests to God, a phrase that qualifies his alleged polytheism. Clearly, the faithful are meant to share in the divine power and glory, and thus they too will have mastery over life and death, in the sense of being able to creatively participate in the creation, sustenance, and governance of life. Divine power seems to be the universal constant in this teaching, but it is not so diffuse that it has no source. God’s power will be shared, but it will still be God’s.

God’s power, for Smith, is embedded in a mutually fortifying relationship between two principles, matter and intelligence. Neither is created and neither can be destroyed. God could create matter from nothing no more

than he could create himself. Smith does not hesitate to call intelligence “immortal spirit,” but spirit is not to be defined in opposition to the elements of matter. Indeed, it is the eternity of our destiny that leads Smith to posit the eternity of our origin: “Is it logical to say that the intelligence of spirits is immortal, and yet that it has a beginning?”²⁸ If the human spirit has a beginning, he reasons, it must have an end. Conversely, no end means no beginning. Intelligences are eternal, but eternity is not egalitarian. That is, eternal beings are not at all equal in power and glory. What makes this world so fascinating is that God has organized the universe in such a way as to grant us a share of his distinctive nature. “God himself, finding he was in the midst of spirits and glory, because he was more intelligent, saw proper to institute laws whereby the rest could have a privilege to advance like himself.”²⁹ These laws, at least in this universe, are no more changeable than God is. These laws govern the living and the dead. “Hence the responsibility, the awful responsibility,” Smith says, “that rests upon us in relation to our dead; for all the spirits who have not obeyed the Gospel in the flesh must either obey it in the spirit or be damned.”³⁰ Smith thus comes upon a most remarkable reformulation of the priesthood of all believers and the communion of saints. The dead cannot be perfect without us. The drama of salvation continues in the afterlife, but the continuity of the living and the dead means that what the faithful do here and now has reverberations in eternity. Never has eternity been so full of time.

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1. See Stephen H. Webb, *Jesus Christ, Eternal God* (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming), chapter 5.

2. This is how I define hyperbole in Stephen H. Webb, *Blessed Excess: Religion and the Hyperbolic Imagination* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1993).

3. David L. Paulsen, “Polemics, Apologetics and the Fruits of Dialogue,” in *Mormonism in Dialogue with Contemporary Christian Theologies*, ed. Donald W. Musser and David L. Paulsen (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 2007), 12–13.

4. Robert L. Millet and Gerald R. McDermott, *Claiming Christ: A Mormon-Evangelical Debate* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2007), 47. Some of this section is taken from my review of this book. See Stephen H. Webb, review of *Claiming Christ*, by Robert L. Millet and Gerald R. McDermott, *Reviews in Religion and Theology* 15 (July 2008): 426–29.

5. Millet and McDermott, *Claiming Christ*, 46. For more information on the LDS view of Jesus Christ as our elder brother, see Corbin Volluz, “Jesus Christ as Elder Brother,” *BYU Studies* 45, no. 2 (2006): 141–58.
6. Robert L. Millet, *A Different Jesus? The Christ of the Latter-day Saints* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2005), 142.
7. Millet, *Different Jesus?* 61.
8. Millet, *Different Jesus?* 61.
9. The Mormon confidence in the ultimate triumph of Christianity, envisioned through an elaboration on the traditional motif of Christ as King, is as out of sync with typical interpretations of American exceptionalism as is their metaphysical alternative to Platonic immaterialism. For my own defense of American exceptionalism, see Stephen H. Webb, *American Providence: A Nation with a Mission* (New York: Continuum, 2004).
10. Augustine *City of God* 20.7.
11. Brian E. Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church: A Handbook of Patristic Eschatology* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), 137.
12. Thomas Hibbs, *St. Augustine: Enchiridion on Faith, Hope, and Love*, trans. J. B. Shaw (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 1996), 127.
13. Hibbs, *St. Augustine*, 128.
14. See the magisterial essay by David L. Paulsen, “The Doctrine of Divine Embodiment: Restoration, Judeo-Christian, and Philosophical perspectives,” *BYU Studies* 35, no. 4 (1995–96): 7–94. I am grateful to Paulsen for personal conversations and for sharing with me some of his unpublished work. See also Webb, *Jesus Christ, Eternal God*, chapter 4.
15. See Webb, *Jesus Christ, Eternal God*, chapter 2.
16. Plato *Timaeus* 29a–53.
17. Francis J. Beckwith, “Mormon Theism, the Traditional Christian Concept of God, and Greek Philosophy: A Critical Analysis,” *Journal of Evangelical Theological Society* 44 (2001): 671–95.
18. All quotations from Mormon scripture and documents in this chapter are taken from and can be easily found at www.lds.org.
19. Richard Lyman Bushman with Jed Woodworth, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Random House, 2005), 206. The quotation from Smith is from the same page.
20. Quoted in Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 206.
21. Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 419. This is recorded in section 131 of the Doctrine and Covenants.
22. Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 420.
23. Joseph Fielding Smith, comp., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 345.
24. Smith, *Teachings*, 345.
25. Smith, *Teachings*, 346.
26. Smith, *Teachings*, 346.
27. Smith, *Teachings*, 346–47.
28. Smith, *Teachings*, 353.
29. Smith, *Teachings*, 354.
30. Smith, *Teachings*, 355.