FRANCIS J. BECKWITH and STEPHEN E. PARRISH. *The Mormon Concept of God: A Philosophical Analysis,* Studies in American Religion 55. Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen, 1991. 156 pp. Bibliography, index. $49.95.

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Francis J. Beckwith and Stephen E. Parrish's *The Mormon Concept of God* contains five chapters; chapter 1 is "The Classical Concept of God." In it the authors give an overview of traditional Christian theism and brief arguments for what they take to be the central claims of the classical view of God, namely, that God is personal and disembodied; that he is the creator and sustainer of all contingent existence; that he is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent; that he is immutable and eternal; that he is the source of all values and perfectly good; that he is able to communicate with human beings; and that he is the necessary and only God. Chapter 2, "Mormon Finitistic Theism," gives what purports to be an overview of Latter-day Saint belief about the nature of God. Chapters 3 and 4, "Philosophical Problems with the Mormon Concept of God" and "Design, Necessity, and the Mormon God," offer arguments against the positions that Beckwith and Parrish attribute in chapter 2 to Latter-day Saints. Chapter 5, "A Biblical Critique of the Mormon Concept of God" offers what its title suggests, an attempt to use the Bible to criticize the Latter-day Saint understanding of God.

The Mormon Concept of God is an unusual book. Beckwith and Parrish are obviously conservative Protestants, but they nonetheless attempt to give a reasoned and fair critique of Latter-day Saint beliefs. They claim their critique centers on showing that the LDS understanding of the "universe is fundamentally irrational" (53) and that the LDS understanding of God is nonbiblical (109). However, they devote most of their time to the former, and that is the best of their work.

There are minor irritations in the book, such as the consistent juxtaposition of "Mormon thinkers" and "Christian thinkers," as if the two groups were mutually exclusive. The final chapter, "A Biblical Critique of the Mormon Concept of God," is similarly irritating. It accuses LDS thinkers of begging the question by assuming an LDS metaphysics and then reading the Bible through

that metaphysics (109). Beckwith and Parrish, however, do exactly the same thing, as they must. They deduce the character of God from the Bible by beginning with their own metaphysics. Given that the Bible is not a metaphysical document, such question begging is unavoidable if one is going to do metaphysics with the Bible; but one ought to recognize that it *is* unavoidable,[1] especially when one relies, as Beckwith and Parrish sometimes do, on an unclear and outmoded metaphysics, such as the Thomistic rewriting of the Aristotelian doctrine of substances, which they use to explain the omnipresence of God.[2] It is additionally irritating that though Beckwith and Parrish themselves point out that there are acceptable conceptual limitations on such things as God's omnipotence, limitations that are compatible with classical theism (14–15), they do not see how those limitations of omnipresence and omniscience might fit with an LDS understanding of God. In philosophical terms, their critique is not always as charitable an interpretation as it should be. On the whole, however, Beckwith and Parrish are judicious and reasoned. They seem the kind of people with whom one could have a genuine discussion of the issues involved.[3]

A major problem with Beckwith and Parrish's book is that they do not know Latter-day Saints and LDS culture well enough to establish the object of their criticisms. Though they recognize divergence within LDS beliefs regarding God, they suggest that there are nine generally held beliefs:[4]

1. God is personal and embodied.
2. (a) God is the organizer of the world, but (b) he is subject to the laws and principles of a beginningless universe.
3. God is limited in power.
4. He is limited in knowledge.
5. He is not omnipresent.
6. God is mutable.
7. He is subject to values and eternal principles that are external to him.
8. He is able to communicate with human beings.
9. (a) God is contingent and (b) one of many gods. (38)

This, Beckwith and Parrish say, is the understanding of God that is "currently held by the leadership of the LDS Church" (79, n. 23).

Without intending to speak authoritatively, I think it accurate to say that 1, 2a, 8, and 9b are doctrinal, although there is some room for discussion. It seems also true that 2b, 5, 7, and perhaps 9a are commonly believed by Church members, but are not doctrinally binding on them. (Whether 9a is commonly believed depends on what one means by the word *contingent.*) Beckwith and Parrish suggest quite reasonably that *immutable* means not that God is an eternally static being, but that he does not change morally, in other words, with regard to his relation to his creations (14–15). Given that interpretation of immutability, I think that proposition 6 that God is mutable is *not* held by most Mormons. In fact, I believe it is doctrinally false. Finally, though some whom Beckwith and Parrish cite, such as Blake Ostler,[5] hold to propositions 3 and 4 and though it seems doctrinally permissible for Latter-day Saints to believe those propositions, nevertheless those beliefs are neither doctrinal nor commonly believed. It is certainly true that contemporary Church leaders who have spoken on such matters, such as Elder Neal A. Maxwell, do not hold to either 3 or 4.[6] Beckwith and Parrish seem not to realize that propositions 3 and 4 currently represent a possible but minority view among Latter-day Saints and that Ostler and others cite earlier general authorities, such as Elder John A. Widtsoe, in support of 3 and 4 in order to argue against the view currently prevailing among Church members and leaders.[7] Consequently, *The Mormon Concept of God* is a critique, not of *the* LDS understanding of God, as if there were one, but of a particular understanding of God that is presently held by some LDS thinkers, but not generally held by the membership or leadership of the Church. Rather than focusing on LDS doctrine as a whole, Beckwith and Parrish would have done better to focus on a particular LDS thinker or group of thinkers.[8]

The authors have not recognized that one of the spin-offs of a belief in continuing revelation is an implicit refusal to allow theology to be set once and for all. Fundamental doctrines of the Church do exist,[9] such as the belief that Joseph Smith was a prophet through whom the fullness of Christianity was restored; the propositions described in 1, 2a, and 8, above; and the few authoritative statements by the First Presidency of the Church (such as the 1916 statement on the nature of God).[10] Except for such things, however, the fact by itself that a particular

theological proposition was commonly accepted or even espoused by a General Authority at one point in LDS Church history means little for whether it is or should be believed now. By themselves, references to the work of B. H. Roberts, John A. Widtsoe, or Bruce R. McConkie tell us what has been believed by respected LDS authorities, they suggest what may have been commonly believed at some point in time, and they open possibilities for discussion. A series of congruent statements by individual General Authorities over time may even suggest that a particular belief is true, as well as commonly believed, and it may give an indication of unfolding doctrine. However, by themselves, references to the writings of particular General Authorities do not necessarily tell us what is doctrinal; they do not tell us in so many words what is binding in terms of belief on those who claim to be Latter-day Saints.

Though Beckwith and Parrish say that they recognize the diversity of belief about these questions in the LDS Church (38), they seem to have recognized neither the depth nor the significance of that diversity on issues that go beyond fundamental doctrines. I suspect that is because they do not recognize that, in spite of the human tendency found among some of its members and leaders to gravitate toward a creed, the LDS Church remains largely noncreedal—precisely because of the Church's commitment to continuing revelation. Within some roughly defined creedal boundaries, *praxis,* not theory, remains fundamental among the Saints.[11] Of course, this is not to say that there are not any number of things that Latter-day Saints accept as doctrinally binding, such as the divinity and bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ, the necessity and efficacy of the atonement, the premortal existence of human spirits, eternal marriage, the necessity of baptism and temple covenants, and so on. The point is simply that though there are LDS doctrines, they tend to be relatively unexplained in formal terms, in other words, philosophically or theologically, and practice is at least as important as, and perhaps more important than, doctrine.

However, it is hardly fair to place all the blame for this misunderstanding of LDS culture and belief on Beckwith and Parrish. Clearly some beliefs, such as the belief that God has a body, are doctrinal, but in many other cases, Latter-day Saints themselves are not sure where common belief ends and firm doctrine begins. In addition, with the possible exception of the

little-known and as yet incomplete work of David L. Paulsen (Philosophy Department, Brigham Young University), Latter-day Saints have never had clear, articulate, expositions of what such concepts as *embodied, limited in power, mutable,* and *contingent* might mean in an LDS theological context. Even Paulsen's work focuses primarily on negative apologetics rather than on theological exposition. Latter-day Saints themselves are usually at least implicitly unclear about how to use such traditional theological concepts to talk about the nature of God. My personal view is that this "problem" may actually be a strength: the emphasis on practice rather than theory and systematized beliefs and the resulting ambiguity of theological concepts may make our attempts to do systematic theology difficult and perhaps impossible, but that may well be a good thing. It suggests that we may want to rethink what it means to do theology or whether it should be done at all.

For those interested in systematic theology, however, two chapters of *The Mormon Concept of God* are particularly important. Beckwith and Parrish offer numerous arguments in response to LDS positions regarding the nature of God,[12] but chapters 3 and 4 are central to their book, and those chapters raise interesting questions about relevant philosophical problems. The first is a discussion of the problem of infinity, a problem with which LDS thinkers must deal if they are to believe that time stretches infinitely backwards and forwards. This problem impinges directly on several of the beliefs that Beckwith and Parrish list, including the beliefs that God is limited in power and knowledge and he is localized in time and space, as well as on the usual construal of the belief in eternal progression. The second of these two chapters is a response to David Paulsen's work. Paulsen has specifically argued that LDS theism is better than classical theism in explaining the design one finds in the universe. Beckwith and Parrish recognize the sophistication of Paulsen's argument (86) and, unlike many others, including Latter-day Saints, they implicitly recognize that his work is a major contribution to LDS systematic theology. I would commend and recommend their book to those Latter-day Saints interested in systematic theology for that reason alone. But I will leave the response to the arguments of that chapter for Paulsen to make in his writing.[13] I will focus my remarks on chapter 3, the discussion of infinity.

Beckwith and Parrish take up the question of infinity in order to argue that

1. it is impossible that there has been an infinite series of past events;
2. it is impossible for there to be eternal progression in a future infinite series of events;
3. there can be no actual infinite of material things;
4. it is impossible to achieve omniscience in time and space. (53)

Obviously, if these propositions are true, then much that is commonly believed by Latter-day Saints is rationally incoherent. Beckwith and Parrish make their case in a number of ways, but the central argument on which their four conclusions are based runs as follows:

1. A series of events in time is a collection formed by adding one member after another.
2. Such a collection cannot be infinite.
3. So, a series of events in time cannot be infinite. (54)

Beckwith and Parrish's conclusions about the four impossibilities listed above follow from this argument that time cannot be infinite.

Most discussions of mathematical infinity are irrelevant to theological discussions of infinity because the word *infinity* is equivocal: it does not mean the same thing in theology as it does in mathematics. In fact, the word *infinity* has any number of meanings, and those meanings must be clarified carefully if one is to discuss the significance of infinity in any particular context. Since, however, the authors' discussion of infinity comes in the context of the possibility of infinite time and space, the discussion of mathematical infinity appears to be relevant to discussions of LDS systematic theology. Without going into detail, let me suggest some responses to Beckwith and Parrish's discussion of mathematical infinity. First, though their endnotes show that there is disagreement about the issues they discuss, the body of their text may easily lead a nonphilosophical reader to believe that the discussion of infinite sets is more clearly in line with their conclusions than it is. Non-LDS philosophers have made cogent arguments for quite different conclusions about infinite sets than Beckwith and Parrish propose. As *The Encyclopedia of*

Philosophy article, "Infinity in Mathematics and Logic," points out, much of Georg Cantor's theory of "the actual infinite" is now almost universally accepted by philosophers of mathematics and logic.[14] The burden of proof therefore lies with the authors, who want to say that the infinite can only be potential. Additionally, Beckwith and Parrish define time as a countable collection, which again requires considerable justification, given that time is almost always thought of as being now uncountably infinite. The authors have raised interesting questions regarding the infinite, but they have not accepted the burden that falls to them if they want to make persuasive arguments for the conclusions they propose.[15]

This question of whether time is created by addition—in other words whether it is a countable set—is a complex philosophical issue, but in addition to the philosophical arguments that have been made that it is not, I think the intuitive answer to the question is no. Time does not appear to be a set of discreet moments added to one another, though any individual's history is.[16] Any history, any collection of events added to each other, would seem to require a beginning, but it does not follow that time must begin. Time is not formed by the addition of one moment of time to another, for there seem to be no such things as moments of time except in reflection, in designating events and gathering them into a set. And even if there were such moments, the addition of one moment to the next could only itself take place *in time.* In addition to seeming to be factually false, the belief that time is formed by the addition of one moment to the next begs the question of the nature of time.

Beside the question of whether time is created by addition, the question remains whether time is a collection—a set—of any kind. Briefly, to assume that time is a set is to assume that there is something exterior to time, something that, so to speak, "does the collecting" that makes the set. That collector could be a Platonic form. It could be an algorithm. It could be God or another person. But the collector is not itself part of the set; it is exterior to it. To assume that time—as a whole and not as any discrete set of events—is a set is, therefore, to beg the question as to whether there is anything, such as God, outside of time. Alternatively, we could say that if time is a set, then there is, by definition, something outside of that set—at least a universe of discourse—that is not itself a set. But why not suppose that time is

the "universe of discourse" for all events and series of events? That supposition seems to offer a coherent understanding of time, as opposed to assuming that time consists of a set of countable time-points or even of a noncountable set. That supposition also seems to present an alternative for the particular LDS belief that Beckwith and Parrish criticize, an alternative that does not lead to any of the four conclusions that they argue for. Beckwith and Parrish's arguments against the infinity of time and space and, therefore, against some commonly held LDS beliefs are interesting but not fully developed or convincing.

Finally, even if Beckwith and Parrish's conclusion that time and space cannot be infinite proves to be cogent, it does not follow that there cannot be an infinity of gods or universes, and so on. For example, though contemporary physicists believe that space is finite (but unbounded), they leave open the possibility that there is more than one universe.[17]

In spite of the weakness of the arguments in *The Mormon Concept of God* and its eristic tendency, Beckwith and Parrish have offered a first step in a dialogue about theology between Latter-day Saints and conservative Protestants. In addition, they raise questions that Latter-day Saints interested in theology must answer, for we are often too confident that our understanding of the nature of God answers the problems of the tradition unproblematically. Too often we seem not to recognize that our own view, while dispelling several misconceptions and solving several puzzles, creates its own further engaging philosophical problems. For example, our emphasis on the similarities between God and human beings often tempts us to overlook the differences and the potential conceptual significance of those differences. Likewise, the belief in God's embodiment makes it difficult to conceive how he knows everything in the universe. And I think we do not sufficiently recognize that those of us who talk about limitations on God's knowledge or power create genuine tensions with ordinary, reasonable beliefs about prayer, prophecy, and God's ability to save. In raising issues having to do with the notion of infinity and its implications for LDS conceptions of God's nature, Beckwith and Parrish do LDS thinkers a service, pointing out a fertile area for thought and inviting philosophical discussion of the issues. Thus, in spite of its flaws, the book is to be welcomed. Perhaps it will encourage more LDS thinkers to think more deeply and to write more

carefully about such issues when they find themselves doing theology. Perhaps the book will make it more possible for LDS and non-LDS thinkers to address issues such as these without the animus that often accompanies those discussions.

NOTES

[1] One can reject a proposed Christian metaphysics by showing that it is incompatible with any cogent interpretation of the Bible, but one cannot establish a Christian metaphysics by showing that it is compatible with a cogent biblical interpretation, nor can one deduce a metaphysics straightforwardly from the Bible.

[2] Along traditional lines, Beckwith and Parrish explain the omnipresence of God in three ways:

1. God knows everything and is present to all things in knowing them.
2. God has power over everything and, by having that power, is present to all things.
3. God sustains the existence of the universe—quoting Thomas Aquinas: "He exists in everything causing their existence." (14)

The first two of these propositions are not necessarily incompatible with LDS beliefs. In fact, they sound very much like LDS explanations of God's omnipresence. The third may or may not be incompatible with LDS beliefs, depending on what is meant by "causing their existence" and by the word *substance.* Put otherwise, we need to know what it means to say that God "exists *in* everything." (Moses 6:60 is provocative in this regard: "Therefore it is given to abide in you, . . . that which quickeneth all things, which maketh alive all things; that which knoweth all things, and hath all power.") The answer to that question was traditionally given by means of the ancient doctrine of substance and its medieval reworking, but the question of substance has been and remains a knotty one in Aristotle and even more so in Aquinas. For example, it is unclear why assertion of the doctrine of substance (when combined with the doctrine of omnipresence to yield the claim that God's substance is in all things) does not cause one to slide from classical theism into either pantheism or, at best, panentheism. In addition, few if any contemporary metaphysicians accept as plausible the Aristotelian doctrine of substance or its Thomistic rewriting. All of these points make Beckwith and Parrish's third argument for God's omnipresence difficult. Though Beckwith and Parrish are right that Blake Ostler's argument against omnipresence (17: if God is omnipresent, then he can't have personal identity) is naive, the part of their argument for omnipresence that most Latter-day Saints would find difficult (3, above) is not nearly as convincing or coherent as they would have us believe.

Most contemporary metaphysicians do not leave room for traditional omnipresence, much less substance theory, so the burden of proof is on those such as Beckwith and Parrish who believe in either: they must defend the doctrine of substance in order to use it to defend the third explanation of

God's omnipresence. Some non-Thomist Catholic theologians have recently looked to other ways of explaining doctrines that were traditionally thought to require one to assume an Aristotelian view of substance. See Jean-Luc Marion's discussion of transubstantiation in *God without Being,* trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1991), 161–82, for an example of such a discussion. Such contemporary approaches might provide the grounds for justifying the third proposition, but what such claims would mean in either an LDS or a conservative Protestant context is less than clear.

[3] Just after finishing this review, I received a copy of two pieces by Beckwith published in the *Christian Research Journal:* Francis J. Beckwith, "What Does Jerusalem Have to Do with Provo?" *Christian Research Journal* (Spring 1992): 39; and an untitled synopsis of *The Mormon Concept of God* in *Christian Research Journal* (Spring 1992): 25–29. The first is a summary of the contents of Beckwith and Parrish's book. The second piece is an opinion-piece diatribe against David L. Paulsen and Brigham Young University for not accepting Beckwith's submission for presentation at the western regional meetings of the Society of Christian Philosophers. Those meetings were held at Brigham Young in March 1992, and Beckwith's submission was a version of the summary of his and Parrish's book. The opinion piece substantially misrepresents the facts of what happened, accuses the LDS Church of being a "pseudo-Christian" cult, describes LDS belief as "bizarre," and warns of the dire consequences to follow from allowing Latter-day Saints to be involved in the Society of Christian Philosophers. Attaching itself as it does to a summary of *The Mormon Concept of God,* Beckwith's opinion piece makes it clear that *The Mormon Concept of God,* though posing as a reasoned discussion of philosophical issues related to the question of LDS beliefs, removes any doubt that it was intended simply as an attack on Latter-day Saints and the LDS faith.

[4] The authors' positions are represented nearly verbatim. Interestingly, Beckwith's summary of *The Mormon Concept of God* in the *Christian Research Journal* lists only seven characteristics of the LDS concept of God, omitting of the nine propositions the seventh and eighth: that God is subject to values and eternal principles that are external to him and that he is able to communicate with human beings. It is unclear why he omits the seventh (that God is subject to external values and principles). Presumably he omits the eighth (that God communicates with human beings) because that claim does not mark a difference between classical theism and the LDS belief he describes.

[5] Blake T. Ostler, "The Idea of Pre-existence in the Development of Mormon Thought," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 15 (Spring 1982): 59–78; and "The Mormon Concept of God," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 17 (Summer 1984): 65–93.

[6] Neal A. Maxwell, "A More Determined Discipleship," *Ensign* 9 (February 1979): 69–73.

[7] John A. Widstoe, *Evidences and Reconciliations: Aids to Faith in a Modern Day* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1943), 62–64, 76–78, 158–65.

[8] Beckwith and Parrish may have a similar problem with audience. It is not clear just how much philosophy they expect their readers to know. Generally, they seem to aim at a nonphilosophical, non-LDS audience, though chapters 3 and 4 are, I think, often too technical for most nonphilosophers.

[9] For a convenient summary of LDS concepts of God and godhood, see the articles on God in Daniel H. Ludlow, ed., *Encyclopedia of Mormonism,* 5 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 2:546–55. See also Gordon B. Hinckley, "The Father, Son, and Holy Ghost," *Ensign* 16 (November 1986): 49–51;

Spencer W. Kimball, *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball,* ed. Edward L. Kimball (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982), 1–23; Bruce R. McConkie, *A New Witness for the Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 21–77; Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation,* 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954), 1:1–55; James E. Talmage, *Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1965), 29–51.

[10] See *Messages of the First Presidency,* ed. James R. Clark, 5 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1971), 5:23–34.

[11] The temple recommend questions are ample evidence for this claim. With a couple of significant exceptions, they focus on practice rather than belief.

[12] I can't resist pointing out that another of their arguments is fallacious. They say, "Since mental realities cannot be sufficiently accounted for by appealing to matter, it seems perfectly reasonable that there could exist a Mind Who is disembodied" (19). That something more than matter is needed to account for mental realities does not imply that matter is not itself necessary, since matter could be necessary but not sufficient. But perhaps all Beckwith and Parrish mean is that the insufficiency of matter shows that the belief in a disembodied mind is not, on the face of it, self-contradictory.

[13] David L. Paulsen, "Early Christian Belief in a Corporeal Diety: Origen and Augustine as Reluctant Witnesses," *Harvard Theological Review* 83, no. 2 (April 1990): 105–16; and *The Comparative Coherency of Mormon (Finitistic) and Classical Theism* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University Microfilms, 1975).

[14] James Thomson, "Infinity in Mathematics and Logic," *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* ed. Paul Edwards, 8 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 4:183–90.

[15] Those who want further reading on infinite sets should see the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* article mentioned in the previous note. It gives both a good overview of the issues involved and a good, if somewhat dated, bibliography.

[16] An individual's existence, however, is not the same as that individual's history. There may be no account, no history, of the totality of an individual's existence.

[17] See Marc Davis, "Cosmology: The Modern Creation Myth," *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 45, no. 8 (May 1992): 47–64, esp. pp. 62–64. Davis gives one construal of the possibility of alternate universes.