
Reviewed by Paul Owen and Carl Mosser

In these lies the history of all men; in their (two) divisions all their armies have a share by their generations; . . . God has sorted them into equal parts until the last day and has put an everlasting loathing between their divisions. . . . There exists a violent conflict in respect of all his decrees since they do not walk together. (1QS IV 15–18)¹

So wrote an ancient scribe of the Qumran community. Religious history is often marked by controversy and division. Of course, divisions between religious communities are inevitable and necessary. If we believe in the existence of objective religious truth, then other opinions must be false and thereby warrant divisions. However, the animosity and hostility characterizing most conversations between such groups is often unnecessary. Rarely does this sort of atmosphere promote reconciliation or mutual understanding. When differences are irreconcilable, or doctrinal disagreements are of such a level that one group or the other must be deemed heretical, even then rancor, pejorative language, misrepresentation, bitterness, delusive oversimplification, and a general lack of charity are not justified. St. Paul reminds us that the proper way to go about these matters is “with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth” (2 Timothy

Divisions between sincerely religious people may prevent them from walking together, but it is not necessary that “everlasting loathing” and “violent conflict” be characteristic of their interactions. The Qumran covenanter was wrong on that point.

Protestants and Latter-day Saints have a long history of debate and hostility between them. It goes without saying that not all of it has been particularly fruitful. How Wide the Divide? is a significant (and controversial) attempt to break past the wall of distrust and actually discuss key issues of theological dissonance between the two communities. In this review we hope to contribute to the spirit of the book by offering our own thoughts on Craig Blomberg and Stephen Robinson’s discussion. In an attempt to continue that dialogue, the present reviewers, both firmly Evangelical, have chosen to publish this contribution in a Latter-day Saint venue. We hope it will not be the last courteous word from either side.

The authors of this book are both trained biblical scholars who teach in denominational schools and are well-qualified to write a book of this nature. Blomberg received his Ph.D. from the University of Aberdeen (Scotland) and is professor of New Testament at the Conservative Baptist Association’s Denver Seminary. Robinson, until recently the chairman of the Department of

2 Verses from the Bible are taken from the following translations: the New American Standard Bible (NASB), the King James Version (KJV), the New International Version (NIV), and the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

3 In line with the spirit of the book, we attempt to interact critically with select portions of Blomberg and Robinson’s conversation. In this review we will have occasion to praise and criticize both authors. However, we will have more criticisms of Robinson than Blomberg because our own theological point of view is very close to Blomberg’s. While we are critical of many of Robinson’s statements, we have not explored all areas of disagreement (or agreement, for that matter). We hope readers will find us respectful and courteous throughout and find what we say to be helpful. In this regard we have tried to focus our comments on what we feel are the main issues of each chapter.

4 Some argue that Blomberg was not qualified to write a book of this nature because Mormonism is not an aspect of his professional interests. That is, they feel that Blomberg was not qualified because he is not a professional apologist with a specialty in Mormonism. However, in light of its stated goals, we feel that this only serves to strengthen the book. Likewise some have said that Robinson was not qualified to write this book because he is not a General
Ancient Scripture at Brigham Young University, received his Ph.D. from Duke University and is professor of ancient scripture at Brigham Young University.

Not since the B. H. Roberts-C. Van Der Donckt debate of 1902 has there been in print such an intelligent discussion of the issues with "the additional merit of being free from offensive personalities or any indulgence in ridicule or sarcasms."\(^5\) Blomberg and Robinson articulate their views well, seek to understand the other's beliefs, and generally give each other a charitable hearing. The authors are to be commended for this outstanding accomplishment. If one is looking for a debate with a winner and a loser, it will not be found in this book.\(^6\) As Robinson writes, "The purpose of this book is to explain and to educate—at last to hear and to tell the truth about each other" (p. 21, emphasis added). As Blomberg suggests, the purpose of the conversation is for "recognizing our areas of agreement and clarifying the nature of our disagreements" (p. 32).

The book is divided into an introduction, four chapters, and a coauthored conclusion. Each chapter covers a significant point of difference between Evangelicalism and Mormonism. Chapter 1 considers the doctrine of scripture. Chapter 2 discusses God and deification. Chapter 3 moves on to the more specific topics of Christ and the Trinity. The final chapter reflects on the doctrine of salvation. Each author prepared a paper presenting his position, which was revised in light of the other's comments. The revised papers on each of four subjects were combined to form the chapters of this book, with a joint conclusion at the end of each chapter in which Blomberg and Robinson seek to answer the question,


\(^6\) A book that debated (rather than discussed) the issues with the goal of determining who is right and who is wrong would be a welcome project from the pens of qualified Evangelicals and Latter-day Saints. However, the logical priority is first to discuss and clarify, as Robinson and Blomberg have done. In order for a debate to be effective, the two sides need to have a clear understanding of their opponent's positions as *their opponents would articulate them.*
“How wide is the divide?” Throughout the volume the authors alternate the order of presentation.

In the introduction (see pp. 9–32) the two authors present the broad landscape of their respective theologies. Robinson begins by lamenting the poor state of affairs that has historically characterized the relationship between the two communities. In his opinion, the major cause of this boils down to a failure of communication; Latter-day Saints and Evangelicals simply do not use the same theological language. With a view to improving communication, he offers an expanded paraphrase of the Latter-day Saint Articles of Faith (see pp. 16–17), which he feels to be the essential doctrinal structure of his church. One of the most helpful parts of the introduction is Robinson’s discussion of the differing “ontological frames” (p. 19) within which the two belief systems operate (e.g., in LDS theology God and humans are the same species of being).7 To some extent, the differences do not consist of affirmations of contradictory propositions; rather, common propositions are placed within the context of opposing superstructures. Robinson suggests that this is why “the LDS tend to see agreement with Evangelicals in primary matters and disagreement in those of secondary importance” (p. 19), while Evangeli-

7 By “ontological frame” Robinson apparently refers to what others have called a worldview. A worldview is the set of presuppositions (true or false) that one holds about the basic make-up of the world (the totality of humanity, the universe, and anything which may exist outside the universe). It includes the answers to such questions as: What is ultimate reality? (God, gods, matter); What is the nature of the universe? (created or autonomous, chaotic or orderly, material, spiritual, or both, etc.); What is a human being? (a highly evolved monkey, a fleshly “computer,” a god in embryo, the image of God); What happens when we die? (do we cease to exist, go to heaven, become reincarnated, rise to a higher form of existence); Do we really know things? If so, how? How do we know right from wrong? Is there a goal to history, some kind of plan or telos? The presuppositions one holds at this level will in large part determine what one will and will not accept as rational and how propositions about the world considered to be true will be understood. Two people can agree that a certain proposition is true but understand it quite differently because of their respective ontological frameworks. A helpful introduction to worldview questions is James W. Sire, The Universe Next Door: A Basic World View Catalog, 3rd ed. (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1997). Please note that Robinson’s phrase “ontological frame” is a distinctively philosophical term. This will be significant to remember later on (see appendix).
BLOMBERG, ROBINSON, *HOW WIDE?* (OWEN, MOSSER) 5

cals tend to see just the opposite. This is a very insightful observation. A chapter devoted to the main differences between the LDS and Evangelical “ontological frames” would have been a worthwhile addition to the book.8 Robinson concludes his introductory comments by saying that Latter-day Saints do not wish to be accepted as historically orthodox Christians or as Evangelicals. He does not think that the two communities should stop proselytizing one another or that they will ever accept each other’s baptisms as valid. Robinson’s desire is for Evangelicals simply to admit that “Mormons accept the New Testament and worship the Christ who is described there” (p. 20).

Blomberg begins by pointing out a lack of responsible material (especially from an Evangelical perspective) that offers a fair presentation of Mormonism. Much of the available literature is written in a polemical spirit, often by ex-Mormons intent on describing “only the worst aspects and most extreme manifestations of that organization or belief system” (p. 22). Sadly, Blomberg notes, the same is sometimes true from the LDS side as well. Like Robinson, he also offers a summary of essential Evangelical beliefs by quoting the National Association of Evangelicals’ seven-point statement of faith. But perhaps his most important contribution to the introduction of this book consists of the four qualifications he offers regarding the goals of *How Wide the Divide*? (see pp. 26–27). He notes that: (1) Many important topics cannot be addressed in this volume because of lack of space; (2) numerous topics of substantial agreement cannot be discussed in detail; (3) crucial issues divide the two groups, which necessitate continued evangelization from both sides; and (4) neither author represents his side in any official capacity, although both reflect a “fair cross-section of the religious traditions [they] represent” (p. 25). Many of the negative reactions to the book from the Evangelical community could easily have been avoided with a careful reading of the introduction.

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8 Though we suspect neither Blomberg nor Robinson would consider himself qualified to write an extended discussion of these issues, which are basically philosophical in nature.
An Aside to Evangelicals

This brings us to an important aside. We would like to speak for a moment to the Evangelical community about some of their unfortunate reactions to this book. We must admit, with embarrassment, that many Evangelicals have reacted in manners simply unbefitting those who profess the name of Christ. The initial responses we have seen are almost entirely negative. One prominent radio personality called the book an “abomination” and suggested to his listeners that they boycott the publisher. However, when questioned at another time by a caller, he had to admit that he had only read “portions” of it. A married couple who run another apologetics ministry in southern California managed to get the book banned from a large Christian bookstore chain. When called by one of the reviewers to discuss the book, the wife had to admit that she had not yet given the book a thorough reading. Her husband (wisely) chose not to discuss the issue. Similar admissions have been made by others in the countercult movement. Perhaps these various “experts” have forgotten that it is improper to comment on something about which one knows little or nothing. (How much can you know if you have not read the book or have only read “bits” and “pieces”?) It is simply wrong to condemn any book without first giving it a fair hearing.

Of course, it is also possible to read a book (completely) with a mind bent on something other than letting it speak for itself. Prejudgments may blind someone to a book’s actual content and goals. Selective reading is as inappropriate as failing to read at all.


10 Some have thought that How Wide the Divide? published by an Evangelical publisher, was a Latter-day Saint attempt to infiltrate Christian bookstores. However, it must be remembered that the book was originally scheduled to be copublished with Deseret Book. Unfortunately this did not work out. Even so, some Latter-day Saint bookstores do carry it. Evangelicalism is “infiltrating” Latter-day Saint bookstores just as much as Mormonism is “infiltrating” Evangelical ones, and more so if Evangelical bookstores continue to ban it.
One Evangelical apologist, who was gracious enough to let us see a prepublication copy of his review, has described *How Wide the Divide?* as “one of the most disturbing and troubling books [he has] read in a very long time.” If such is the case, one has to wonder how widely this person reads. One can readily find far worse books by Evangelicals on the market that should be more disturbing and troublesome to one’s theological sensibilities.

How anyone could find this book to be all that disturbing and troubling is most difficult to understand. Was it disturbing to those within the countercult movement because the two authors were courteous to one another? Was it the fact that Robinson’s views did not sound weird enough? Or was it simply the fact that each writer allowed the other to describe his own religion on his own terms rather than according to the standards of countercultists? Why is it that so many in the Evangelical world cannot seem to see the value in having a competent Latter-day Saint scholar describe his own belief system? Is it really the case that Robinson and Blomberg did nothing to contribute to a clearer understanding of the issues dividing us? Did neither author make any valid points worthy of commendation? It is quite difficult to believe that they did not. What we find to be “disturbing and troubling” is the manner in which so many countercultists have attacked this book without giving it a fair hearing. Whatever its faults, it has merits that deserve mention. A failure to mention the book’s virtues along with its vices demonstrates a basic lack of objectivity and integrity.

Some Evangelicals have suggested that this book legitimizes Mormonism or is part of a scheme by the LDS Church to infiltrate orthodox Christianity.\(^\text{11}\) Perhaps this issue deserves brief mention. *Nowhere* in the book does Blomberg describe Mormonism as a legitimate expression of Christianity (he doesn’t think it is).\(^\text{12}\)

\(^\text{11}\) They do so by completely ignoring Robinson’s statement that “Mormons do not now wish to be known as post-Nicene, ‘orthodox’ Christians” (p. 20).

\(^\text{12}\) Blomberg has expressed this opinion in an interview about the book. Even so, Latter-day Saint readers should not let this hinder them in the least from reading his contribution with an open mind. When Blomberg declares that he does not believe that Mormonism is properly classified as Christian, he does not do so pejoratively. Rather, this is a theological conclusion that was forged, in part, by his discussions with Robinson on the matter.
Nowhere will one find statements comparable in content or tone to the controversial document “Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium,” written by Charles Colson (Evangelical) and Fr. Richard John Neuhaus (Roman Catholic). For instance, on page 16 in this document we read: “Evangelicals and Catholics are brothers and sisters in Christ.” Blomberg and Robinson never describe each other as such. The question of whether or not Mormonism is an acceptable Christian communion was simply not a topic of discussion (even though Blomberg wanted it to be). However, this book was not an exercise in feeble ecumenism wherein the authors pat each other on the back and “appreciate their diversity” while avoiding their differences. For example, while How Wide the Divide? and the “Evangelicals and Catholics Together” both affirm that their respective fellowships believe in “justification by faith,” Blomberg and Robinson add the important qualification that they understand the doctrine differently; whether or not the word alone should be added is listed as one of the important issues that continue to divide them (see p. 196). This book is as significant for what it does not say as for what it does say. Neither Blomberg nor Robinson ever legitimizes the other’s belief system. They recognize profound substantive differences of the highest degree and let them stand. They may conclude that the divide is not as wide as some have tried to make it, but they never deny that the divide is very deep. The accusations of certain Evangelical apologists reveal that they simply have not read the book carefully.

What Has God Revealed?

Blomberg and Robinson begin their discussion of the main issues that divide Evangelicals and Latter-day Saints with a chapter on the doctrine of scripture. The issue of the different canons, and the nature of the works in those canons, is the wellspring from which many of the other differences flow—including different understandings of God himself. The question of what God has and has not revealed is a question of utmost seriousness.

Open versus Closed Canon

Mormonism operates under the principle of an "open" canon of scripture. This means that for Latter-day Saints "God's Word," when referring to written materials, is not limited to the sixty-six books of the Bible. Evangelicals, on the other hand, recognize God's written revelation only in the Bible. As a result of this, the two communities determine their theologies in the context of different paradigms. Whether or not the canon is closed occupies a place of central discussion in the chapter on scripture.

Robinson's primary argument for the possibility of an open canon seems to rest on an argument from silence. He writes, "If the Bible only said that the Bible provides sufficient information and authority for salvation in the kingdom of God, the LDS would find that a more convincing case" (p. 71). We do not find this a very helpful observation. What is to prevent the Evangelical from responding in kind: "If the Bible only said that the Bible does not provide sufficient information and authority for salvation in the kingdom of God, Evangelicals would find that a more convincing case"? The real question has to be twofold: (1) What body of information is necessary for salvation? and (2) Does the Bible contain this information? If the Bible contains a sufficient body of information for the establishment and continuing proclamation of the Christian gospel, then no more scripture is necessary. This would not in and of itself prove that the Bible cannot be added to, but it would give the church good reason to be skeptical of subsequent claims to such inspiration (since such revelations would be superfluous). While admitting that in theory no conclusive reason exists why the canon must stay closed, Blomberg is correct to insist that "it is difficult to see how any new book could ever successfully be added to it" (p. 45).

So what exactly is it necessary for the people of God to know for "salvation in the kingdom of God"? We must keep in mind

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that orthodox Protestantism has never argued that the scriptures are sufficient for anything and everything. Wayne Grudem offers a concise and helpful definition of what this doctrine does and does not mean: “The sufficiency of Scripture means that Scripture contains all the words of God which he intends his people to have at each stage of redemptive history, and that it contains everything we need God to tell us for salvation, for trusting him perfectly and for obeying him perfectly.”

Another way of putting this would be that from an Evangelical perspective, the Bible contains all the truth “necessary” to get a person into the kingdom and keep him or her there. That is the view to which anyone who would seek to show the inadequacies of a closed canon must respond. So what is “necessary” according to this definition? Certainly it does not go beyond the “first principles” of the fourth LDS Article of Faith—namely faith, repentance, water baptism, and laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost. According to the third Article of Faith, salvation is available to all who comply with these laws and ordinances. In order to show the inferiority of the Evangelical view it would behoove Robinson to demonstrate what information concerning these foundational laws and ordinances necessary for salvation is lacking in the Bible, and how uniquely Latter-day Saint canonical sources supply this indispensable data. Thus, given Robinson’s own premises, no apparent reason exists why he should not affirm the sufficiency of the Bible for “salvation in the kingdom of God.”

Second, it does not seem to us that Robinson adequately critiqued Blomberg’s arguments for the superior plausibility of a closed canon based on traditional criteria (see pp. 43–45, 59–68). These criteria are apostolicity, agreement with previous scripture, and widespread use in the churches. Robinson responds in a three-fold fashion. (1) He begins by pointing out that “these criteria are nonbiblical and therefore without much force in the LDS view”

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16 Robinson concedes this reading of the third Article of Faith in his discussion of the relationship of obedience to salvation (see p. 157).

17 One must keep in mind that Evangelicals do not feel a burden to prove that the canon is closed, but merely that it is more likely closed than open.
However, this is simply an assertion, for he fails to overturn Blomberg’s arguments to the contrary for the first two criteria (see pp. 40–41).\textsuperscript{18} (2) Robinson then responds that from an LDS viewpoint their scriptures do agree with prior revelation and are “apostolic” in character (p. 69). This expands the definition of “apostolic” beyond the limits of Blomberg’s definition (see pp. 43–44) and thus fails to address his point. When Evangelicals speak of an apostolic person or writing they are referring to the foundational apostles (see Ephesians 2:20) of the first century. Evangelicals are concerned that a document be connected with the original apostles in order to insure that the foundational documents of the Christian church retain a consistent witness with the primitive gospel. The further removed a writing is from the context of the first century, the greater the likelihood of discontinuity between it and the original message. It is because Evangelicals are very much concerned with the preservation and promulgation of the original message that they insist on apostolicity.

(3) Robinson’s next response likewise indicates a failure to appreciate the value of the above criteria. He writes concerning the criteria of widespread use that it “would by itself logically preclude any new document from ever being considered Scripture” and therefore “is not a criterion of judgment at all” (p. 69). He goes on to describe these criteria as “nonbiblical, arbitrary, self-validating and therefore irrelevant” (p. 69).\textsuperscript{19} The fact of the

\textsuperscript{18} Blomberg does not claim that all the criteria can be derived from the Bible. Obviously it is the Bible itself which is under consideration and any such claim would be viciously circular. Rather, he avoids circularity by adducing New Testament support for the first two criteria as applied to the Old Testament and then by extension applies them to the New.

\textsuperscript{19} Robinson’s protestation that the criteria are “nonbiblical, arbitrary, self-validating and therefore irrelevant” is itself irrelevant since they are statements about the Bible. Any statement about scripture that is not contained in scripture is metaphilosophical in nature and thereby subject to the canons of rationality and the universal principles of logic. If Blomberg provides good reasons (and more could be supplied) for accepting the criteria as he presents them, then the criteria are not arbitrary and irrelevant. What is arbitrary is Robinson’s dismissal of the criteria without even attempting to demonstrate that the reasoning behind them is faulty. Further, it should be pointed out that the traditional criteria for the closed canon were developed long before Joseph Smith claimed to have received new scripture. Originally, they were not arguments for a closed canon but merely a description of how the canonical books
matter here is that Evangelicals are highly concerned to guard the body of apostolic teaching that was handed down from the holy apostles of earliest Christianity (compare 2 Timothy 1:13–14; 2 Peter 3:1–2). This by necessity places certain limits on subsequent canonical development. W. D. Davies correctly points out the danger, of which Protestants and Catholics alike are quite aware: “Progressive and continuous revelation is certainly an attractive notion, but equally certainly it is not without the grave danger of so altering or enlarging upon the original revelation as to distort, annul, and even falsify it.”

A third point on the issue of a closed versus an open canon can be made in this context. Robinson notes in one place that “it makes Evangelicals nervous that Mormons add books to the canon.” He continues, “Well, it makes Mormons equally nervous that if God did choose to reveal or to restore something to the world, Evangelicals would be prevented from accepting it by their unbiblical conviction of sufficiency and their biblically unwarranted closing of the canon” (p. 71). The doctrine of suffi-

were recognized for what they are—God’s Word. It was a description of the process in history God had superintended by which some works were included and others excluded. The criteria were the means the church used to recognize and differentiate between scripture and other writings. The criteria can be used in a rulelike fashion to determine the status of new claims of scriptural status for a work because it can be reasonably expected that all scripture, having a common divine author, will share a common stock of properties not shared by other literary documents.


Of course, if God did choose to reveal or restore something to the world, Evangelicals would be very interested in it and would want to treat it properly. Further, nothing, not even the concept of a closed canon, would prevent Evangelicals from receiving such a revelation providing that they could be assured that it was in fact from God and not some other source (human or supernatural). In regard to the biblical documents, Evangelicals are convinced that we do have the necessary assurance and confirmation of their divinely inspired
ciency may be nonbiblical, but that does not make it *unbiblical*, a distinction Robinson himself makes in another context (see p. 60). Also, to set the record straight, *God* closed the canon, not orthodox Christianity. The question that continues to arise in the minds of non-Latter-day Saints is, “What could God possibly have to say to the world which would not be anticlimactic?” Blomberg rightly asks, “Once God revealed himself in Jesus, what need is there for further revelation?” (p. 45).23 According to the author of Hebrews, God has spoken definitively “in these last days” (i.e., the first century A.D.) in his Son (Hebrews 1:2), and the saving record of God’s self-revelation was confirmed to the primitive church by “those who heard” the Lord (Hebrews 2:3). Robinson’s response to this is as follows: “On the finality of God’s revelation in Christ, Evangelicals and Mormons are in total agreement. Where we disagree is in our assessment of how well that revelation was preserved down through the centuries in Christian ‘orthodoxy’” (p. 61). This leads to what again is the fundamental question in this particular point of the discussion: What aspects of God’s self-revelation in Christ that are necessary for salvation in the kingdom of God have been restored through the uniquely Latter-day Saint canonical additions? If none exists, then whence the need for further scriptures beyond the historically preserved apostolic deposit? Even if such additional revelation “might increase our understanding” (p. 58), but not reveal new knowledge necessary for salvation, they would be superfluous and anticlimactic to what God has revealed in these last days through Jesus Christ. Given the path of the progress of revelation in the Old and New Testaments, to do so would be highly uncharacteristic of God.

What seems to be at stake here is a fundamentally different understanding of the nature of God’s self-revelation in the person

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23 To say that we know every possible “need” that could exist would be a claim to omniscience that no Evangelical makes. If such a need warranted further revelation, since none of us know what that need is or could be, the purported revelation would have to demonstrate it *post facto* to us, something Evangelicals do not believe the “revelations” of Joseph Smith and his successors do.
of his Son. Roger Keller, writing before his conversion to the LDS Church, noted:

Our view of canon also dictates to some degree our understanding of Christology. If we understand the canon as still open, then we are prone to view Christ as revelator, in the sense that he conveys knowledge about the past, the present, and the future. If we view the canon as essentially closed, then we will tend to view Christ as the self-revelation of God, capturing the past, the present, and the future in his person.²⁴

If Keller’s observation is valid, it may be that the stance one takes on the status of the canon reveals something about one’s fundamental perspective of the nature of God’s historical unfolding of himself in the world. This issue will merit further consideration below when the doctrine of the Trinity is discussed.

But one more important reason to believe that God has closed the canon of scripture is not discussed by Blomberg or Robinson. This is what might be termed the “Advent argument.” The last writing prophet of Israel was the prophet Malachi. With the writing of Malachi’s book God completed his revelation within the Old Testament dispensation. On this all are agreed.²⁵ But Malachi does not simply cap off the Old Testament era of revelation, he also points to the next era of revelation and gives definite markers by which it can be recognized. This includes such specific prophecies as: “Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me: and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in: behold, he shall come, saith the Lord of hosts” (Malachi 3:1 KJV); “I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord: And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse” (Malachi 4:5–6 KJV); and “For, behold the day cometh,

²⁵ That is, among Protestants and Latter-day Saints. Catholics and Eastern Orthodox on the other hand view various intertestamental documents known as the Apocrypha as “Deutero-Canonical.”
... [when] the Sun of righteousness [shall] arise with healing in his wings” (Malachi 4:1–2 KJV). According to Jesus the first and second passages refer to John the Baptist (see Matthew 11:7–15/Luke 7:24–28; Matthew 17:10–11/Mark 9:11–12),26 which is also how the Gospel writers interpreted them (see Mark 1:2–4; Luke 1:17; compare Luke 1:76 and John 3:28). The third passage appears to be a clear reference to Jesus (John’s father Zacharias may have even alluded to Malachi 4:2 in Luke 1:78 as a reference to Jesus).

We see that when God closed the Old Testament canon he did so with an indication of what was supposed to happen next—the Messiah and his messenger were to come. The Old Testament was closed with the indication that the next event in salvation history was to be the first advent of Christ. The people of God were supposed to welcome a new revelatory dispensation only when they saw the messenger preparing the way of the Lord—the Elijah figure, and the Sun of righteousness himself. When they saw these things come to pass they would know that the new era of God’s revelatory activity had begun. And this is exactly how those who became the first Christians knew that God was again speaking and acting in salvation history. They saw that John announced himself as the messenger preparing the way of the Lord. They saw that Jesus Christ was indeed the Sun of righteousness. They knew that these things were so because Jesus and John fulfilled the expectations of the previously given scriptures and because the Father spoke from heaven in confirmation (see Matthew 3:17/Luke 3:22/Mark 1:11; compare John 12:28–30).

When we get to the last written book of the New Testament, the Revelation of John, we find a similar phenomenon. The New Testament canon closes with the expectation of Christ’s second advent (see Revelation 22:12, 20) and gives definite indicators of the signs preceding this. If God is consistent in his pattern we anticipate that there will be no new scriptural revelation in the time

26 The name “Elias” in the KJV of these passages is simply the transliteration of the Greek equivalent of “Elijah” (‘ΗΛασ) and does not refer to a different individual. The same Greek word is used in the Septuagint to translate Elijah’s name. We point this out because some Latter-day Saints, not understanding the way the KJV translators dealt with names, have mistakenly thought that Elijah and Elias were two different persons.
between Revelation and the second coming of the Lord Jesus. We have no reason to suppose that God has changed what appears to be his clear pattern of revelation. And, since Jesus has not returned, we should believe that the canon remains closed by God.27

Is the Bible Inerrant?

In Robinson and Blomberg’s dialogue on scripture, the topic of biblical inerrancy comes up. Many readers will find that their views on the matter are much closer than might have been expected. Latter-day Saints are often perceived as believing that the Bible contains errors. In large part this is because many Latter-day Saints declare this as part of their belief. From an Evangelical perspective, Robinson’s views are quite refreshing. In this chapter he affirms a high view of the Bible that is very close if not identical to the Evangelical viewpoint. However, it seems to us that Robinson’s views represent a minority position among contemporary Latter-day Saints.28

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27 We can only speculate how Latter-day Saint scholars might respond to this line of reasoning. We suspect they would simply deny that the spirit of prophecy was inactive during the intertestamental period. However, mainstream Judaism had a conscious perception that the spirit of prophecy was not active during this time (compare 1 Maccabees 4:46; 14:41; 2 Baruch 85:3; Josephus, Against Apion 1:41; Tosefta Sota 13:3). Some evidence would need to be forthcoming as to why Christians should look to sectarian Judaisms (e.g., Qumran) for their example rather than mainstream Judaism.

28 Though likely more believe this way, we know of only one other LDS scholar with similar sympathies toward biblical inerrancy. In personal conversation Stephen D. Ricks said that he has little difficulty with the doctrine of inerrancy as articulated by the Evangelical Theological Society. Similar to Robinson, but at the popular level, LDS apologist Richard R. Hopkins believes that Evangelicals and Latter-day Saints “largely agree” on inerrancy as long as it is not understood to entail the doctrine of sufficiency (“completeness” in his terms). Biblical Mormonism: Responding to Evangelical Criticism of LDS Theology (Bountiful, Utah: Horizon, 1994), 25. If Robinson, Ricks, and Hopkins are representative of a growing trend within Mormonism regarding the doctrine of biblical inerrancy, we welcome it as a move toward truth. Liberal Latter-day Saints (as represented by individuals associated with Signature Books, Dialogue, etc.) as well as liberal Protestants and Catholics will (unwarrantedly) find this an irrational throwback to pre-Enlightenment primitivism. For a good defense of the rationality of inerrancy, see J. P. Moreland, “The Rationality of
Robinso n begins by correctly pointing out that “the LDS view of the nature of Scripture is actually closer to the Evangelical view than is the view held by liberal Protestants or Catholics” (p. 55). He goes on to cite the qualifications offered in an abbreviated version of the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy in comparison with the eighth Article of Faith, which reads in part: “We believe the Bible to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly.” Robinson observes: “The wording is intended to communicate exactly the same caution to Latter-day Saints that the phrases ‘when all facts are known,’ ‘in their original autographs,’ and ‘properly interpreted’ from the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy are intended to convey to Evangelicals” (p. 56). He later claims that: “There isn’t a single verse of the Bible that I do not personally accept and believe” (p. 59). Most strikingly, in the joint conclusion both authors affirm: “We hold the same understanding of ‘inerrancy’” (p. 75).

We are personally very encouraged by what we read on this topic. We would simply point out a couple of things. First of all, at both the popular and scholarly level it is common to find Latter-day Saints expressing a far less adequate view of the matter. For example Latter-day Saint scholar Blake Ostler writes: “Christian fundamentalists see revelation as a truth disclosed in propositional form, reduced to writing in the Bible. In this view, every word of the Bible is considered equally inspired and all writers exhibit total harmony.” He continues: “The propositional theory sees God as an omnipotent deity who can insure by coercive power that

Belief in Inerrancy,” Trinity Journal NS (1986): 75–86. This has recently been reprinted with several other important articles on aspects of inerrancy in Douglas Moo, ed., Biblical Authority and Conservative Perspectives (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel, 1997), 155–65. Since it is so common to find Latter-day Saints who misunderstand the doctrine of inerrancy and what it does and does not entail, we encourage our Latter-day Saint readers to follow Stephen Robinson’s example and investigate the matter further in some of the sources cited in this section. It may be that many more Latter-day Saints hold views on the Bible not that far removed from Evangelicalism and are simply unaware of that fact.

29 The abbreviated statement from which Robinson derives these phrases says in whole: “Inerrancy means that when all facts are known, the Scriptures in their original autographs and properly interpreted will be shown to be wholly true in everything that they affirm, whether that has to do with doctrine or morality or with the social, physical or life sciences” (p. 35).
prophets hold his exact views, express the message in totally accurate ways, and are devoid of shortcomings that would detract from God’s message.”30 Although much of Ostler’s discussion argues against a straw-man position, as if “fundamentalist” Christians believe that apostles and prophets were passive receptacles of divine communication, his basic point is true.31 Evangelicals believe that God has communicated to men propositionally, and that he took the care to insure that the scriptural writers conveyed the propositions accurately.32

Second, it seems to us that the view of inerrancy advocated by Robinson and Blomberg is essentially the view of inspiration originally held by Joseph Smith.33 Joseph Smith professed plainly


31 One wonders if here Ostler hasn’t confused the dictation theory of inspiration with the Evangelical doctrine of inerrancy. No Evangelical would say that God must use “coercive power” to ensure that the biblical writers would express his views and be in harmony with one another. At the least Ostler has stated the view in a manner with which its proponents would never agree. He has also set up a false dichotomy between propositional and nonpropositional revelation. As Oxford professor Richard Swinburne has written, “Divine Revelation may be either of God, or by God of propositional truth. Christianity has claimed that the Christian revelation has involved both; God became incarnate and was in some degree made manifest on Earth, and through that incarnate life various propositional truths were announced.” Revelation: From Metaphor to Analogy (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), 2.


33 On this see Philip L. Barlow, Mormons and the Bible: The Place of the Latter-day Saints in American Religion (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 11–42. Ostler admits that this was “the dominant view among early con-
enough: “I believe the Bible as it read when it came from the pen of the original writers. Ignorant translators, careless transcribers, or designing and corrupt priests have committed many errors.”34 Some Latter-day Saints might cite Doctrine and Covenants 1:24 as evidence that Smith did not believe that inspiration necessarily entailed inerrancy. However, while this verse mentions “weakness” and “the manner of [human] language,” it says nothing of mistakes in the record. Anthony Hutchinson admits: “There are many examples from Joseph Smith’s language in describing his revelations that suggest a propositional model of revelation and the plenary inspiration and inerrancy of scriptures.”35 However, in an attempt to bring balance to the picture, Hutchinson then goes on to cite several examples to the contrary, none of which are particularly conclusive. Ether 12:23–28 says nothing of errors in the text, but merely speaks of human “weakness.” The title page of the Book of Mormon does say, “if there are faults they are the mistakes of men.” However this could equally apply to errors of transmission or copying rather than the original record. Furthermore, who is to say that this statement refers to anything beyond spelling and grammatical mistakes? At best such statements are inconclusive in light of Smith’s rather explicitly stated views on the matter.36

What Is the Nature of Revelation?

Within Robinson’s contribution to this chapter appears to be a conflicting understanding of the relationship between revelation and scripture. When writing about the topics above he straightforwardly identifies revelation and scripture. Subsequently, however, he makes statements that are inconsistent with this. We have

vertis and ... Joseph Smith’s early revelations tended to reinforce this view.” Ostler, “The Book of Mormon as a Modern Expansion,” 108.

34 Scriptural Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1993), 369.


36 Some might question the relevance of the statements cited above concerning errors in the Book of Mormon. Such statements are relevant in that they reveal something about Smith’s view of inspiration in general, and hence the inspiration of the Bible.
in mind the following: "Scripture is mediated revelation, derivative revelation. The direct revelation to a prophet or an apostle is immediate and primary, and this is the word of God in the purest sense—as word and hearing rather than as text" (p. 57). "For Latter-day Saints, the church's guarantee of doctrinal correctness lies primarily in the living prophet, and only secondarily in the preservation of the written text" (p. 57). "The record of revelation cannot logically be more authoritative than the experience of revelation" (p. 58). In these statements Robinson sounds much like Blake Ostler, who likewise appears to argue that scripture itself is not, strictly speaking, revelation, but rather a human record of revelatory experience. As Robinson notes (see pp. 57-59), this provides an explanation for why a continuing prophetic office might be needed since authority is primarily rooted in prophetic experience rather than a written text. However, given this view of the matter, Robinson's view of inerrancy does not seem to follow. How can a text be inerrant if it is not verbally inspired to begin with? Inerrancy cannot be organically derived from the neoorthodox view of revelation here expressed. Why then does he believe in it at all? At the least Robinson's views on the nature of revelation and its relationship to scripture are underdeveloped; at worst they are contradictory.

The Transmission of the Biblical Text and the Joseph Smith Translation

Another issue that arises in Blomberg and Robinson's dialogue is the relationship between Joseph Smith's "translation" and the original text of the Bible. It is a fundamental belief of the LDS Church that the present form of the biblical record was corrupted after the death of the apostles. This belief is rooted in 1 Nephi 13, where it is predicted that the "great and abominable church" will remove "plain and precious things" from the sacred

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record.38 On the basis of Nephi’s vision, as well as numerous other factors, Joseph Smith evidently felt compelled to produce a version of the Bible that would restore the original message of the ancient text.39

The problem is the very simple fact that text-critical studies have not, for the most part, tended to substantiate Smith’s proposed emendations.40 Robinson recognizes that “the bulk of text-critical evidence is against a process of wholesale cutting and pasting” of biblical manuscripts41 and suggests that the process


39 The factors that led Smith to this conclusion and the goals of the project itself are thoroughly discussed by Philip L. Barlow, “Joseph Smith’s Revision of the Bible: Fraudulent, Pathologic, or Prophetic?” Harvard Theological Review 83/1 (1990): 45–64. See also Monte S. Nyman and Robert L. Millet, eds., The Joseph Smith Translation: The Restoration of Plain and Precious Things (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1985).

40 Victor Ludlow and S. Kent Brown do offer a few examples of JST readings with some measure of support in ancient versions. See “The Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible: A Panel,” in Scriptures for the Modern World (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1984), 80–81. However, none of the parallels between the JST and ancient versions are particularly striking, and from our perspective they all appear to be coincidental.

41 A word about variations in the textual tradition is perhaps in order here. It has not been uncommon for some Latter-day Saints to assume that since variants in the ancient manuscripts of the Bible exist, this is evidence for wholesale theological tampering with the text. Robinson’s statement reflects his knowledge that these are simply not the kinds of variants found in ancient manuscripts. Most variants are of spelling, grammatical form, word order, or attempts to clarify difficult phrases. Most often variants came into existence because a scribe accidentally misread or miscopied the manuscript he was working on. The point is not to deny the rather obvious fact that corrupted readings occur in the textual tradition, nor even that corruptions were sometimes purposely introduced—some even being theologically motivated. Bart Ehrman’s work demonstrates that those theological corruptions in the textual tradition are simply not of the type some Latter-day Saints have claimed. See Bart E. Ehrman, The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). There are very few textual variants that could affect Latter-day Saint doctrine in any substantial way. The type of examples of “textual tampering” offered by Latter-day Saints like Joseph F. McConkie are all profoundly irrelevant, since they involve additions to the textual tradition, not deletions as Nephi’s
consisted mainly of "keeping other apostolic or prophetic writings from being included in the canon" (p. 63).42 So what are we to make of the JST itself? Robinson proposes that the JST "should be understood to contain additional revelation, alternate readings, prophetic commentary or midrash, harmonization, clarification and corrections of the original as well as corrections to the original" (p. 64). From a non-LDS perspective this seems to give a suspicious amount of breathing room to Joseph Smith's prophetic gifting. In other words, this explanation has the appearance of an ad hoc solution to the problem generated by the fact that the JST does not agree with any of the ancient textual traditions. On what objective basis might one ever test the authenticity of Smith's restorations if they need not correspond with subsequent

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42 Other Latter-day Saint scholars have suggested alternate interpretations of 1 Nephi 13. Hugh Nibley insists: "The changes consisted in new interpretations of the scriptures, not in corruptions of the text, and in substantial omissions." Hugh W. Nibley, Since Cumorah (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 27. Anthony Hutchinson suggests: "This description conceivably might refer not to deliberate and widespread scribal manipulation of the text itself, but rather to suppression of entire texts before the canon of the Bible was formulated, ... to an interpretive (but not textual) change wrought by the hellenization of categories in which the texts were preached and explained ... or even to simply a religious change in the church which used the texts, thus altering the life-situation and existential horizon in which they were perceived." Hutchinson, "LDS Approaches to the Holy Bible," 109.
advances in the discovery and study of ancient manuscripts? Are we to simply assume that Smith’s revisions do not restore the original text, except in those rare places where there happens to be a correspondence between the JST and some ancient version? It would seem to be more consistent for the Latter-day Saint to view all the JST material as authentic restorations of the original text, despite the consistent witness of the manuscript tradition. From our reading of the evidence this appears to be what Smith and the early Latter-day Saints thought it was.

Two points of inconsistency about Robinson’s discussion of the JST should be mentioned before we move on. Elsewhere Robinson rather sharply criticized another Latter-day Saint writer for suggesting ideas about the Book of Mormon very similar to his own about the JST. But if the JST readings need not be seen as authentically ancient material, why must the Book of Mormon? More to the point, why not take a similar view of the book of Moses, since it is part of the JST material? Could these not also be interpreted as mere prophetic commentary, midrash, or the like? Perhaps we are mistaken, but there seems to be some methodological inconsistency at work among conservative LDS scholarship.

Finally, according to Robinson’s own criteria, logically the JST should be a part of the Latter-day Saint standard works. That

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43 Robinson likewise puzzles the non-LDS reader when he admits regarding the Book of Abraham: “I do not claim to know the relationship between Joseph’s Egyptian papyri and the finished text” (p. 65). Blomberg fairly asks, “Should not Joseph’s track record where he can be tested influence our assessment of his work where he cannot be tested?” (p. 51).

44 This would cause problems also, since divergent readings of various verses occur within the uniquely LDS scriptures themselves. For a discussion see Brown, “A Panel,” 84–88.


46 Robinson believes that “Joseph did frequently restore ancient information in the JST” (p. 65), but this clearly implies that much if not most of the JST is not a restoration of ancient material.

is, unless Robinson wants to advocate a position recognizing a division between authoritative scripture and unauthorized scripture, in which case the term scripture becomes meaningless. Discussing a different point in the chapter Robinson affirms that “what a prophet writes under inspiration is Scripture, as 2 Peter 1:20–21 indicates” (p. 62). When discussing the JST he affirms, “Of course we believe the JST is ‘inspired’” (p. 64). He later affirms “that the JST is ‘inspired’ and that the LDS should consult it as a supplement to their canonical Scriptures” (p. 65). But if what a prophet writes under inspiration is scripture, and the JST is inspired, then why is it not scripture to the LDS? If Robinson believes that it is “scripture” in some sense other than the canonical sense, then he should define more clearly what he and other Latter-day Saints mean by the term. Otherwise, as Robinson himself says, “the similarity of terms makes us think we are communicating, but when all is said and done both sides go away with the feeling that nothing quite added up, and this raises suspicions of deception” (p. 13).

The Unique LDS Scriptures

LDS readers of How Wide the Divide? will likely not be convinced by Blomberg’s criticisms of the Book of Mormon and the Book of Abraham. Blomberg does not say anything particularly new on these matters. His criticisms primarily relate to the anachronistic presence of distinctive New Testament language and themes in the Book of Mormon and the failure of the Book of Abraham to correspond to the Joseph Smith Papyri as would a straightforward translation. What is surprising, however, is Robinson’s failure to offer evidence in favor of these Latter-day Saint scriptures. As with this section of our review, most of Robinson’s discussion of the doctrine of scripture centers on the Bible and whether or not the canon is closed. The scriptural status of the other LDS standard works is clearly affirmed, but Robinson really says little beyond this. LDS and Evangelical readers alike will be disappointed that Robinson fails to give objective reasons for believing these additional works should be added to the canon, that he does not defend them against Blomberg’s criticisms, and (especially) that he fails to offer any evidence in favor of their his-
torical veracity. This makes us curious as to his opinion concerning the merits of the various evidences for the Book of Mormon and the Book of Abraham as proposed by men like Hugh Nibley and the scholars of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies. One wonders if he questions their value since he chose to leave Blomberg’s criticisms unanswered rather than to use this scholarship in his defense. If Robinson prefers not to make use of the work of Nibley, FARMS, and so forth, then we would have liked to see him offer some evidence of his own rather than make unsupported assertions.

God and Deification

Latter-day Saints and Evangelicals are agreed that one’s view of God is of paramount importance. The issue of God’s identity and nature is fundamental to every other issue. When we explore who God is and what sort of being he is, we are exploring the basic issue of the universe. One must understand God in order to understand his or her role in the world and how to live properly in

48 The process of argumentation should actually reverse our list. The defender of the unique Latter-day Saint scriptures (or those of any other group for that matter) must first offer evidence for historical veracity both of the contents and the production of the works, including evidence of divine intervention in the process. Objections to the works must then be considered, and criticisms of the argument in their favor must be adequately overturned. Even if successful up to this point there remains the third step of giving a solid argument for calling the works scripture and including them in the canon. Even a historically reliable document produced or recovered with supernatural assistance is not necessarily scripture.

it. But, as Blomberg and Robinson conclude on this topic, the doctrine of God is where the divide between Evangelicals and Latter-day Saints is greatest (see p. 109). And it is from our differences concerning God that most (if not all) of our other theological differences arise.

**Finite Theism**

Robinson begins his part of the discussion by claiming that “In the LDS view God is omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, infinite, eternal and unchangeable” (p. 77). He corroborates this claim by citing passages from the Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants. Robinson’s reason for beginning in this way is to counter the common perception that the Latter-day Saint concept of God is deficient in one or more of these areas. He writes:

> My point in citing these few sources of the many that might be appealed to from LDS Scripture is that it just won’t do to claim Mormons believe in a limited God, a finite God, a changeable God, a God who is not from everlasting to everlasting, or who is not omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent. Such beliefs would violate the expressly stated official doctrines found in our own Scriptures. (p. 78)

Later Robinson says that “Many Evangelicals are convinced, wrongly, that Latter-day Saints believe in a finite, limited or changeable God, even though that notion is repugnant to us” (p. 88).

We desire to be charitable to Robinson, and we certainly would not want to dictate what he personally believes or disbelieves or what he personally finds repugnant, but in these statements Robinson is less than straightforward with what many Latter-day Saints believe and teach. This is especially so regarding the finitude or infinitude of God. It is quite common for us to come across Latter-day Saints either in writing or in person who are quite open about their belief in a finite deity. Often this is presented as a virtue of the Latter-day Saint concept of God because it accounts for the dual existence of order and chaos in the universe and is an
easy solution to the infamous "problem of evil." Supposedly a finite deity, as presented by some Latter-day Saints, more adequately answers these problems than does the classical conception of God found in orthodox Christianity.

Robinson may not believe in a finite deity, and it may be that he does find the concept repugnant (as do most Evangelicals).

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50 The superiority of a finite God to solve the problem of evil has been asserted by many Latter-day Saints. But, as Peter C. Appleby mentions, a finitist solution "involves the curtailment of traditional claims about divine power, denying omnipotence and insisting that God has none of the miraculous powers attributed to him in Christian literature." "Finitist Theology and the Problem of Evil," in Line upon Line: Essays on Mormon Doctrine, ed. Gary J. Bergera (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 87, emphasis added. This is a price few Latter-day Saints should be willing to pay. A recent and thorough defense of one of the classical Christian answers to the problem of evil by an Evangelical is R. Douglas Geivett, Evil and the Evidence for God: The Challenge of John Hick's Theodicy (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993). For a different Evangelical take on the issue, see John S. Feinberg, "God, Freedom, and Evil in Calvinist Thinking," in The Grace of God, the Bondage of the Will: Historical and Theological Perspectives on Calvinism, vol. 2, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1995), 459–83. Today it is generally acknowledged by philosophers, theist and atheist alike, that the classical logical problem of evil fails. In its place atheists like William Rowe promote the more modest evidential problem of evil. The evidential problem of evil is thoroughly discussed and replied to in Daniel Howard-Snyder, ed., The Evidential Argument from Evil (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1996). Especially see the five essays by William Alston, Alvin Plantinga, and Daniel Howard-Snyder.


52 Latter-day Saint thinkers are not the only current defenders of a form of finite theism. Process theology (panentheism) and the so-called "open view" of God defended by some "Evangelicals" are other examples. Craig Blomberg notes at the end of his chapter on God and deification: "Evangelicals, at the same time, are increasingly expressing dissatisfaction with their classical formulations of doctrines such as the immutability, impassability and simplicity of God." He continues by noting that some in the Evangelical camp even speak of God's "choice to remain ignorant of certain future events so as to allow his creatures genuine freedom" (p. 109). It is certainly a question worthy of inquiry whether or not those who think of God in such terms can meaningfully be described as "Evangelical." For a good critique of both process theology and the "open view," see Norman L. Geisler, Creating God in the Image of Man? (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1997). For a critique of the "open view" specifically,
Perhaps he believes that a finite deity is an improper object of worship. He may even agree with us that these other Latter-day Saints are mistaken about the virtues of a finite deity. But it is simply inaccurate for him to say that Evangelicals are erroneous in their perception of Latter-day Saints as advocates of a unique form of finite theism. What else are Evangelicals to conclude when perhaps the foremost defense of the Latter-day Saint concept of God is David Paulsen’s Ph.D. dissertation entitled “Comparative Coherency of Mormon (Finitistic) and Classical Theism”? A few years ago when Stephen E. Parrish and Francis J. Beckwith wrote a critique of the Latter-day Saint concept of God, LDS reviewers of the book criticized them for many things, but none argued with the statement that Mormonism teaches a form of finite theism. If Mormonism does not teach a form of finite theism, this is news to Evangelicalism—it will also be news to many Latter-day Saints. Robinson may well be right in his interpretation of the Book of Mormon and those sections of the Doctrine and Covenants from which he quotes; it does appear that these passages teach something other than a finite deity. Even so, reli-

see also Donald G. Bloesch, God the Almighty: Power, Wisdom, Holiness, Love (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1995), 254–60.

53 An attempt to defend the idea that a finite deity is appropriate to worship is Blake T. Ostler, “The Concept of a Finite God as an Adequate Object of Worship,” in Line upon Line, 77–82.

54 David L. Paulsen, “Comparative Coherency of Mormon (Finitistic) and Classical Theism” (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1975). Interestingly, Paulsen was one of the LDS endorses of How Wide the Divide? We should add that in personal conversation Paulsen has indicated that he does not find the terms finite and finitistic religiously adequate and wishes another term existed with which to express the same idea with equal precision.


56 Of course, from our perspective, this is an inconsistency between the LDS standard works and other quasi-official LDS writings. The passages quoted
gions often promulgate beliefs inconsistent with their official declarations and sacred texts. Robinson may claim that this has occurred in Mormonism and he may try to correct it, but he certainly should not deny what seems to be a well-known Mormon doctrine. Whether or not it is official or unofficial, the belief is widespread and characterizing. On the other hand, if he represents a move away from finite theism to a more orthodox conception of God, we welcome it and encourage all Latter-day Saints to follow. From our perspective it is the right thing to do.

All this said, we are still not sure that Robinson has presented his readers with a concept of a God who is truly infinite. We do not deny that Latter-day Saints describe God with the various omni terms (omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, etc.). But we feel that in Latter-day Saint terminology the meaning is so far removed from standard usage that it serves only to miscommunicate. The simple use of a term does not entitle one to all the

by Robinson on pages 77-78 are 2 Nephi 9:20; Doctrine and Covenants 20:17, 28; 88:11–14, 41.

Sterling McMurrin writes: “Although materialistic concepts dominate Mormon metaphysics and theology, something quite uncommon for Christian theism, the important distinction of the Mormon doctrine also does not reside simply in its materialism. That distinction is found, rather, in the finitude in the concept of God that follows necessarily from the denial of ultimate creation, a finitude that places Mormonism in fundamental opposition to the absolutism that has been a primary assumption of theological discussion throughout the history of Christian thought.” Sterling M. McMurrin, The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1965), 26–27, emphasis added. Also compare similar statements in McMurrin’s “The Mormon Theology of B. H. Roberts,” in The Truth, the Way, the Life: An Elementary Treatise on Theology: The Masterwork of B. H. Roberts, ed. Stan Larson (San Francisco: Smith Research Associates, 1994), xiii–xxv.

LDS philosopher Kent E. Robson insightfully writes: “Mormon writers who use traditional Christian absolutist terms—such as ‘omniscience’ and ‘omnipotence’—do not realize the extent to which Mormon theology differs from Catholic-Protestant theism. Such misapplication can be confusing to both Mormons and non-Mormons trying to understand Mormon teachings about the nature of God.” He further explains that “Mormons who are attracted to terms of absolutism should carefully consider what else they may unintentionally be embracing. They should consistently renounce such attributes or clearly distinguish between Mormon usage and traditional Christian usage.” Kent E. Robson, “Omnipotence, Omnipresence, and Omniscience in Mormon Theology,” in Line upon Line, 70, 74. Robinson did not make these necessary distinctions, and
privileges of that term, and no one has the right to redefine a word idiosyncratically. For example, what Latter-day Saints such as Robinson refer to as "omnipresent" would probably be more accurately described as "omni-influential" (compare D&C 88:12–13, 41). What he terms omniscient as "omni-aware." A God having influence everywhere is not the same as one having personal presence everywhere. Similarly, a God who has no false beliefs about the past and present and future is not the same as one who has knowledge of all things past, present, and even future. Further, an omniscient Being does not just possess the most knowledge, he possesses all possible knowledge—if it can possibly be known he knows it and always has. Likewise, a most powerful deity is not equivalent to an all-powerful or omnipotent

Blomberg failed to insist on them. This is a weakness of both of their presentations.

59 Robinson writes: "While God in the LDS view is not physically present in all things but rather spiritually present, I don't think this really differs very much from the Evangelical view in which God's omnipresence is likewise not a physical or material presence, but a spiritual presence" (p. 77). He misses the point. According to Evangelical theology God is personally present everywhere, something that is just not possible in the Latter-day Saint view. According to the LDS view God is not personally in the room with us as we write this review. He would be aware of what we do and he could influence what we do, but he himself is not in the room with us. In the Evangelical view God is personally present as we type these words. This view appears to be the necessary interpretation of passages like Psalm 139:7–12 in which David rhetorically asks "Where can I flee from your presence?" The point is that everywhere David could possibly go, the Lord would already be personally present there to help and sustain him.


deity. Having more power than any other being simply is not the same as having all power.\textsuperscript{62} We might also add that a deity

\textsuperscript{62} For example, Paulsen argues that God’s omnipotence or almightiness is the “power over all things so that no one or no thing can thwart the fulfillment of his will.” David L. Paulsen, “The Doctrine of Divine Embodiment: Restoration, Judeo-Christian, and Philosophical Perspectives,” \textit{BYU Studies} 35/4 (1995–96): 86. But the fact that God may be sufficiently powerful that no being or thing can thwart him is not the same as saying that God possesses all power. It is therefore not a definition of almighty or omnipotent in any way. For if God is not conceived of as the most powerful being \textit{that is possible} who possesses \textit{all the power that there is}, then it could turn out (logically) that a being or thing more powerful than God exists and that that being or thing could logically thwart God’s will. Then, by Paulsen’s definition, God would not be omnipotent. In Paulsen’s view God can be accurately described as “most powerful” but only by hyperbole as “all powerful.” Classical Christian theism does not define God’s omnipotence comparatively as does Paulsen. But neither does the tradition define it in terms of (so-called) “absolute power” because that leads to absurdities (God’s making square circles and rocks too big for him to lift, etc.). God’s omnipotence is therefore qualified \textit{but not limited} by what is logically possible given the attributes that he possesses in his essence. Many (including Paulsen and Ostler, but not just Latter-day Saints) have thought that this qualification compromises the meaning of \textit{omnipotence} because then God does not have \textit{all power} as the term’s etymology implies but only all logically possible power. But there need not be any compromise of the term’s meaning. We would argue that God contains within himself all metaphysical, ontological, and logical necessities and is therefore totally self-dependent and limitless. Further, no such thing as \textit{illogically} possible power exists to be possessed by God. In our view no outside or independent constraints limit what God can and cannot do. He is the source of \textit{all} truths—including logical and metaphysical ones. Thus the logical qualification on God’s power does not and in fact \textit{cannot} compromise his true omnipotence (unless one postulates that there is such a thing as \textit{illogically possible} power that God could but does not possess!). In orthodox Christianity God is omnipotent in the very fullest sense of the word because even the so-called logical “limitations” stem from his own being. God is truly omnipotent—he can do everything that is permitted by his nature and it is not possible that he or any being could do more. Nothing can be done that God cannot do. (Acts of evil are things God \textit{will not} do and consistently chooses not to do. They are not possible for him to do because of his own desire to maintain that characteristic consistency of his that we term \textit{goodness}.) God doesn’t \textit{happen} to be comparatively the most powerful being. He possesses all the power that there is and therefore is the most powerful possible being whether any other beings exist or not. Presumably Robinson, as with other Latter-day Saints, would not believe that God is omnipotent in the way we have described it here.
without flaws and imperfections is not the same as a deity possessing all perfections.63

The Doctrine of Divine Embodiment

Another key issue differentiating the Evangelical and Latter-day Saint views is the issue of whether or not God the Father has a body. Related to this is the meaning of Genesis 1:27, which tells us that “God created man in his own image.” Does this imply that God is a material being? And what about the numerous texts in the Bible that ascribe bodily parts to God? Blomberg makes a number of excellent points in his carefully argued discussion. John 4:24, in the context of Jesus’ discussion of worship and spatiability (compare John 4:20–21), would seem to indicate that God is essentially a spiritual being (see p. 97).64 Blomberg notes fur-

63 For another LDS perspective on God’s perfections, compare Roberts, Mormon Doctrine of Deity, 124–30.

64 We understand that many Latter-day Saints take the phrase here “God is Spirit” as a predication of composition (i.e., God is made of “spirit,” but this does not preclude flesh). It might be helpful to point out that this is a clear case of essential predication (i.e., God’s essential nature is Spirit). This must be the case because Jesus speaks these words in the context of answering the Samaritan woman’s statement about Jews worshiping God in Jerusalem and the Samaritans on Mt. Gerizim (see John 4:20–24). The point Jesus makes is that God is not “located” either at Jerusalem or at Gerizim. The Samaritan woman had built a false dichotomy in her mind because she conceived that God was in some way “located” in one of these two holy places and that to worship him one had to be at the proper place. Jesus in effect says, “God is not located either in Jerusalem or at Gerizim. God is Spirit; he is not ‘located’ anywhere. You don’t need to go to the right place, you need to worship with the right attitude—in spirit and in truth.” Of course, for Jesus to make the point that God’s essential nature is unlocated Spirit precludes a physical body also being a part of that essential nature since a body is located. In the case of the incarnation Jesus takes on a human nature (see Philippians 2:7), but this does not affect in any way his divine nature since the two are distinct within his person. Passages like Matthew 23:21 and 1 Kings 8:13 that speak of God’s dwelling in the temple do not nullify this because it was not God’s being but his glory that dwelt in the temple (compare Psalm 26:8). Many commentators, including some Evangelicals, deny that John 4:24 is an essential definition of God. The reason given is the parallelism the phrase shares with the other Johannine phrases, “God is light” (1 John 1:5) and “God is love” (1 John 4:8). It is said that the last of these refers to God as the one who deals with man out of love and in love and the previous phrase is usually left unspecified except to say that God is not, in essence, light; compare George R.
ther: “As one who is all-powerful, God can make himself heard through audible voices and can make himself seen through temporary visions, as occurs periodically throughout the Scriptures, without demonstrating that by nature God has a body” (p. 98). With reference to the image of God, Blomberg points out numerous alternatives to the understanding that God has a bodily form. Plausible suggestions include man’s exercise of dominion over creation, his need to live in community, his moral nature, and his participation in God’s communicable attributes (see pp. 99–100). We would concur with Blomberg’s suggestions and similarly feel that Latter-day Saints are too quick to explain texts such as Genesis 1:26–27 simply in bodily terms. The reader should note, however, that Blomberg does not rule out the possibility that God can make himself seen in visions (see, e.g., Isaiah 6:1; Ezekiel 1:26–28; Daniel 7:9) nor the phenomenon of theophanies (see, e.g., Genesis 18; 32:24–30; Exodus 24:10). The point is that God in his essential nature is spiritual and invisible (compare John 1:18; 1 Timothy 1:17).

This being said, if it were granted that God the Father does have some sort of form or body as such texts as Ezekiel 1:26–28 and Daniel 7:9 might seem to indicate, what kind of body would it be? Doctrine and Covenants 130:22 declares that God the “Father

Beasley-Murray, John, vol. 36 in Word Biblical Commentary (Waco: Word, 1987), 62. Elsewhere Robinson favorably cites the Catholic scholar Raymond Brown to similar effect. Are Mormons Christians? (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1991), 80. Though it is true that God deals with man spiritually just as he does lovingly (and that is required in this passage), to say that this is all John 4:24 implies severely deflates the force of Jesus’ statement to the Samaritan woman. He is not just saying that she must worship God spiritually, he is making the additional point that she can worship him anywhere because God is in essence and person everywhere present. The parallels with 1 John 1:5 and 4:8 do not define John 4:24 because light is a metaphor for truth, goodness, and purity, and love is an abstract concept. But “Spirit” is neither metaphorical nor abstract; thus the parallel is merely verbal.

Robinson himself admits that these are coherent interpretations, but they are just not literal enough for him (see p. 80).

Robinson’s explanation of 1 Timothy 1:17 is that it simply means God is not physically present for anyone to look at (see p. 79). This does not seem adequate in light of Paul’s words a few chapters later, where he describes God as the one “whom no man has seen or can see” (1 Timothy 6:16, emphasis added).
has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man’s.” But nothing in these Old Testament texts or any others reflect this idea—it seems to be based entirely on Joseph Smith’s later recollections of his first vision (so also Robinson, p. 78).\(^{67}\) The real point of contention is not the idea of God’s having a theophanic form \textit{per se}, but the idea that God has a body analogous to our own.\(^{68}\) Christians should have no problem describing God in anthropomorphic terms,\(^{69}\) but reducing God to the level of a glorified human being creates \textit{huge} problems.\(^{70}\) Contrary to what some Latter-day Saints

\(^{67}\) We might note that Doctrine and Covenants 130:22 seems to plainly contradict what we read in lecture 5, paragraph 2, of \textit{Lectures on Faith}, where we read that the Father is a “personage of spirit” in contrast to the Son, who is a “personage of tabernacle.” Paulsen argues that Joseph Smith already believed at this time that the Father had a physical body since the lecture goes on to say that the Son is “the express image and likeness of the personage of the Father” (hence the Father must likewise have a body). He ignores the rest of the sentence, however, which defines what the “image and likeness” of the personage of the Father entails, namely “possessing all the fullness of the Father, or the same fullness of the Father.” To be the Father’s image in this context seems to involve possessing the Father’s fullness. See Paulsen, “Doctrine of Divine Embodiment,” 28–32. Paulsen might respond that the fullness includes embodiment, but this appears to be quite foreign to the spirit of Lecture 5.

\(^{68}\) That is what the Westminster Confession of Faith is getting at when it says that God “is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions” (2.1).

\(^{69}\) A widespread and increasing tendency is apparent in which some people have a hard time describing God in anthropomorphic terms. Such would do away with or downplay the use of such anthropomorphic terms as \textit{Father} and \textit{Son}. But Evangelicals are cognizant of the fact that alternatives like \textit{Creator}, \textit{Redeemer}, and \textit{Sanctifier}, though describing important aspects of God’s person and labor, simply do not convey the same truths as the anthropomorphic terminology. We would contend that a \textit{proper} use of anthropomorphic language is necessary in our description of God.

\(^{70}\) The failure to distinguish between an appropriate anthropomorphism and the inappropriate “humanizing” of God (as in Joseph Smith’s later thinking) renders Jacob Neusner’s recent article on the subject both misleading and inadequate. See Jacob Neusner, “Conversation in Nauvoo about the Corporeality of God,” \textit{BYU Studies} 36/1 (1996–97): 7–30. Alon G. Gottstein notes: “Instead of asking, ‘Does God have a body?’ we should inquire, ‘What kind of body does God have?’ In other words, anthropomorphism is classically identified with what we may term crude anthropomorphism. God’s body is seen as identical, or similar, to the human body. This understanding leads to a rejection of anthropomorphism. A different understanding of the divine form may lead to a different posi-
may think, it is not beyond orthodoxy to take the language of Ezekiel 1 and Daniel 7 seriously while continuing to maintain the orthodox concept of God.\textsuperscript{71} Evangelical theologian Donald Bloesch can even write: “God infinitely transcends the human creation, and yet God embodies humanity within himself. He stands infinitely beyond materiality, but he has his own divine nature, his own supernatural body.” He further affirms: “The God of the Bible is not anthropomorphic, but he is probably closer to the manlike gods of primitive religion than to the more refined spiritual conceptions of deity in mysticism and idealism.”\textsuperscript{72} If what Bloesch intends with this language is that God has localized a portion or aspect of his glory for the sake of his creatures in a form or spiritual “body,” then his statements are unproblematic.\textsuperscript{73} After all, Ezekiel summarized his vision of the Almighty who was on the throne in “a figure like that of a man”

\textsuperscript{71} Ezekiel 1:25–28, Daniel 7:9–10, and perhaps Exodus 24:10 are the only passages in the Bible that we feel could be taken to support the Latter-day Saint view. However, Stephen Robinson makes this interesting admission: “It is understandable that some Latter-day Saints would want to find this view of God the Father explicitly taught in the Bible, but I think Prof. Blomberg is correct in pointing out that it is not there” (pp. 104–5). He goes on to add, for reasons previously explained, that “I do not expect to find the true nature of the Godhead or the corporeality of God described clearly in the Old Testament, nor do I argue that it was once there and has been removed” (p. 79). Some Latter-day Saints may rightly feel that Robinson jumps ship too quickly on this one. Given the LDS belief that Jesus is the Jehovah of the Old Testament, Robinson presumably would say that these passages refer to the Son and not God the Father. However, in Daniel 7 the Ancient of Days sitting upon the throne must be God the Father because “the one like a Son of man” approached him. The phrase “one like a Son of man” is often interpreted as a reference to the Messiah. It is also considered to be the background behind the title “Son of man” that Jesus employs in the Gospels to refer to himself.

\textsuperscript{72} Bloesch, \textit{God the Almighty}, 50. Latter-day Saints might also find interesting what Bloesch writes in another place: “God has a spiritual body just as he has his own space and time” (ibid., 89). This is contrary to Doctrine and Covenants 130:22, but quite in keeping with lecture 5, paragraph 2, of \textit{Lectures on Faith}.

\textsuperscript{73} Latter-day Saint readers should \textit{not} assume that Bloesch is using terms like \textit{spiritual body} as they normally would. The larger context in which these quotations are found makes it quite clear that he is not.
by saying: "This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord" (Ezekiel 1:28). God localized the likeness of his glory so Ezekiel could see something, even if he did not see God's essence while God spoke to him. And, a "body" of glory is not the same as a glorified body. Gottstein may be correct when he writes, "God has a body for the sake of beauty, so that he may be perceived by the pure in heart." A second issue would be whether or not God's body (if it is even appropriate to use that term) is essential to his nature or personhood. If God the Father can in some sense be said to be "embodied," is he necessarily so? Evangelicals will certainly continue to reject any notion that embodiment is essential to who God is, for embodiment implies notions of spatiality and limitation inappropriate to the divine essence.

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74 A quick reading of the English text might give one the mistaken notion that the opening "this" of the above quotation refers to the "radiance around" the Lord in Ezekiel 1:27-28. However, an inclusio of sorts is marked off by several occurrences of the word רוח ("likeness, appearance") in Ezekiel 1:26 and 28b, which indicates that the referent is the enthroned Almighty himself. Also note that this passage does not say that God is a man, an exalted man, or that he has a body of flesh and bones. It simply says that he appeared with the רוח of a man. According to Brown, Driver, and Briggs, this refers to external appearances—that God appeared like a man. A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1979), 198. Nothing in this vision indicates that this was anything more than an appearance for the sake of God's creatures and Ezekiel specifically. While God's being is invisible and embodiment is not a part of his divine nature, he can localize glory or appear in theophany in order to give his creatures an object upon which to fix their attention while he speaks with them.

75 Notice that throughout this vision (chapters 1-3) Ezekiel carefully avoids saying that he saw God directly.


77 This is the problem with Robinson's response that since God the Son is embodied, "humanity and divinity are not incompatible categories" (p. 91). It indicates nothing of the sort, for physicality is an attribute of Christ's human nature, not his divine essence (compare Mosiah 7:27; 15:1-2). Robinson's statement is furthermore self-defeating, for in order to be intelligible, one must take the very terms humanity and divinity in the sentence as distinct "categories," thereby using the very "two natures" language of Christian orthodoxy that Mormonism claims to deny.
Deification

Perhaps the doctrine that has generated the most controversy between Latter-day Saints and Evangelicals is the notion of “deification” or “theosis.” Can human beings be exalted to such a state as to be properly termed gods? Or is such language inappropriate when applied to mortals? Or is there a proper use for such language, but only with very careful qualifications? Blomberg notes, “if all Mormons mean by [deification] is that we are re-created in God’s image, perfect in holiness and immortal in nature, with physically resurrected bodies, then we join hands with them in looking forward to such a wonderful day” (p. 107). He goes on to add, however, that if Latter-day Saints believe that “humans can take on God’s being and God’s incommunicable attributes . . . then we demur, claiming that they have not adequately preserved the distinction in essence between the creature and the Creator” (p. 107). Another issue raised in this context is the nature of the Father’s alleged experience of mortality in Latter-day Saint thought. Blomberg writes: “Belief in the humanity of God the Father could . . . be viewed merely as a curiosity, if it were not for the additional claim that God was once a finite human” (p. 105).

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78 We do not intend to nitpick, but one has to wonder about the wisdom of describing Evangelicals and Latter-day Saints “joining hands” as we look toward the eschatological future, given the amount of theological dissonance that presently divides our two communities.

79 Keeping in mind Lorenzo Snow’s famous couplet and Joseph Smith’s King Follett Discourse, which Robinson describes as “quasi-official statements,” although not “scriptural or canonized in the technical sense” (p. 85). This leaves the non-LDS reader wondering why these two statements should be taken as exceptions to Robinson’s often-stated reminder that “Scripture is normative; sermons are not” (p. 74).

80 Blomberg adds in an endnote (see p. 213 n. 29) that he means by “finite” merely what Robinson wrote earlier: “The Father became the Father at some time before ‘the beginning,’ as humans know it”; see “God the Father,” in Encyclopedia of Mormonism, 2:549. We would like to see Robinson clarify what he meant in this context, since, strictly speaking, he writes of a beginning to God’s role as a Father, not of a beginning to God’s existence as God. Robinson is likewise ambiguous when he writes: “To those who are offended by Joseph Smith’s suggestion that God the Father was once, before the beginning, a man, I point out that God the Son was undoubtedly once a man, and that did not
Robinson's discussion of deification was cogently presented and insightful. He notices that the ontological distinction between Creator and creatures is perhaps "the heart of the disagreements between us, for Latter-day Saints maintain that God's work is to remove the distinctions and barriers between us and to make us what God is" (p. 81). In order to establish some proper ground rules for discussion, he suggests: "The official doctrine of the Church on deification does not extend in essentials beyond what is said in the Bible, with its Doctrines [sic] and Covenants parallels, and in Doctrine and Covenants 132:19-20" (p. 85). Evangelical readers will find Robinson's explanation of the Latter-day Saint doctrine less objectionable than other presentations because of his careful use of terms and his sensitivity in avoiding speculation. He writes that, "Those who are exalted by [God's] grace will always be 'gods' ... by grace, by an extension of his power, and will always be subordinate to the Godhead." He furthermore insists: "Any teaching beyond this involves speculation without support from either the Bible or the other LDS Scriptures" (p. 86).

It is certainly an open question as to whether or not it would be appropriate to describe glorified human beings as "gods" in any sense. But without question, a precedent for such language exists in the early church. The teachings of such men as Irenaeus, Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Dionysius, Athanasius, Maximus the Confessor, and Augustine all contain references to theosis. The doctrine remains central to the soteriology of the

compromise his divinity" (p. 91). In Latter-day Saint theology Jesus was already a God before his incarnation. Is Robinson implying that the Father likewise experienced mortality as a God-man, rather than merely a man like the rest of us? If Robinson holds this view, he would be similar to Blake Ostler, who likewise attempts to incorporate the notion of God's prior experience of humanity with a concurrent affirmation of his eternity. Employing concepts adapted from panentheism, Ostler suggests that God has two "polar aspects." He writes, "it appears consistent with the Mormon revelation of God to consider the immanent aspect of God's spirit as eternal rather than emergent in time, and God's corporeal or concrete aspect as emergent through time rather than eternal." He continues, "Hence, the Mormon belief that God was once as man now is may mean that God once stood in relation to time and space as man now does, even as Jesus did, but was always very God in spirit or participation in divine experience and purpose." Ostler, "Mormon Concept of God," 91 n. 73.

See Robinson's discussion in Are Mormons Christians? 60-63. For a survey of the evidence from an Evangelical perspective, see Robert V.
Eastern Orthodox Church. Perhaps because of the influence of ancient apologists like Irenaeus, one can even detect glimpses of the doctrine of theosis in the writings of John Calvin.

One should not misunderstand this data and assume that the early church had a consistent doctrine of theosis or even that it was a pervasive belief. But the doctrine of divinization was taught by some early Christians and became especially popular in the third and fourth centuries. It is significant to note, however, that the doctrine has yet to be identified among the beliefs of the earliest Christians (2 Peter 1:4 and John 10:34 notwithstanding). It is

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83 Calvin writes, for instance, “From this follows the other point: since Christ exercises the office of Teacher under the Head [the Father], he ascribes to the Father the name of God, not to abolish his own deity, but to raise us up to it by degrees” (Institutes I.XIII.24).

84 Admittedly, John 10:34/Psalm 82:6 and 2 Peter 1:4 are more plausible proof-texts for the doctrine and are appealed to by both Latter-day Saints and Eastern Orthodox alike. However, both are cogently (and in our opinion, more plausibly) explained from an Evangelical point of view. The first thing to observe is that John 10:34/Psalm 82:6 says “you are gods” (NIV) not “you will become gods.” If one is inclined to apply this statement to believers then it must be viewed as a present state of affairs, not an eschatological hope. In whatever sense believers would be called “gods” they should be called that now. But, as Blomberg argues (see pp. 101–2), in its original context it is more likely that this refers either to God’s council among the angelic creatures or to God’s declaration to a gathering of mighty men and judges upon the earth rather than to believers. For in the very next sentence the Psalmist declares that these gods “will die like mere men” and “will fall like every other ruler” (Psalm 82:7 NIV). This gives Blomberg’s second possibility a definite edge. It would be an odd doctrine indeed which claimed that after death men could be exalted to the status of gods and then die again under God’s judgment (compare Psalm 82:8 NIV). The second passage likewise fails to say what advocates of deification need it to say. 2 Peter 1 says that God’s divine power has given believers everything they need for life and godliness (see 2 Peter 1:3 NIV). Through God’s glory and goodness he has given them great and precious promises so that through them they “may participate in the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4 NIV). As Blomberg states, this “is clearly talking about becoming like God morally, not metaphysically” (p. 101). This is confirmed by the synonymous parallel in the verse that adds “and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires” (2 Peter 1:4).
not even represented in the apostolic fathers, those early Christian leaders between the apostles and the church fathers.\textsuperscript{85} Carl A. Volz observes that it is extremely difficult to define precisely the doctrine of deification among the church fathers because it meant various things to different writers. However, the various views on the doctrine did have much in common. Volz writes: "The deification of human beings does not imply an equality with God, or a participation in the godhead. There remains a distinction between God and humanity. The similarity lies in the sharing of qualities, such as holiness, incorruption, and immortality, but human beings remain creatures, and their godlike qualities are the gift of God’s grace."\textsuperscript{86} Stephen Robinson seems to have presented a view of deification very much in line with this common understanding of the church fathers.\textsuperscript{87}

However, a number of factors cause Evangelicals considerable pause. The very prominence of the doctrine in the early fathers

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What it is to participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption of the world is illustrated in 2 Peter 1:5–7, which says, "For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love" (NIV). These are all moral qualities to be exemplified in this life as a demonstration that one in fact shares in the divine nature. Nothing in this passage indicates that men can become gods in any sense.

\textsuperscript{85} The closest they come to such a doctrine (and it is not very close) is speaking about the unity or immortality of believers. For example, Ignatius encourages the Ephesians to be in perfect unity "in order that you may always have a share in God" (Ignatius, Ephesians 4:2). Ignatius elsewhere describes the Lord’s Supper as "the antidote we take in order not to die but to live forever in Jesus Christ" (Ignatius, Ephesians 20:2). If these passages contain anything like deification (and this is doubtful) it is found in the mystical connection between sharing in God and eternal life. Citations are from the "letter of Ignatius to the Ephesians," in the \textit{Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations of Their Writings}, 2nd ed., trans. J. B. Lightfoot and J. R. Harmer, ed. and rev. Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1992), 139, 151.


\textsuperscript{87} Some have criticized Robinson for substantively modifying the Latter-day Saint doctrine to make it sound more like the church fathers’ view. Whether or not he has remains an issue for LDS scholars to determine. In any case he has clarified the LDS view, at least his version of it, in a manner that is far less offensive to Evangelicals. This is commendable.
\end{quote}
and the contemporary Eastern Orthodox Church seems to be related to a deficient soteriology. In Catholic and Orthodox theology grace is understood primarily in terms of an infusion of divine power that removes the stain of sin and makes one acceptable before God. Donald Bloesch notes: "The differences in soteriology between Protestants on the one hand and Catholics and Orthodox on the other must be partly attributed to the confounding of justification and deification (theosis) in the early church. . . . The temptation among the fathers and doctors of the medieval church was to interpret salvation in terms of deification, thereby losing sight of the New Testament meaning of justification." This same tendency to supplant St. Paul’s doctrine of forensic justification (see Romans 4:5) with an emphasis on gradual transformation into the divine image, thereby blending justification and sanctification, is discernible in certain strands of Latter-day Saint thought. For example, Blake Ostler, in an important article on the concept of grace in Mormonism, writes: “In almost all instances, Paul used the term ‘sanctification’ synonymously with justification.” He furthermore speaks of a shift within post-1831 Mormonism “from a notion of grace grounded in states of being to one grounded in an ongoing process of growth in the light offered by God.” He later links such shifts in thinking away from viewing salvation in terms of “states of being,” with “a concept of deification” in which people are “deified by ‘growing in the light’ offered by God, by sharing fully in the divine power and knowledge.” Thus Ostler speaks for a large segment of

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88 Canon 11 on justification from the Council of Trent says, for instance: “If anyone says that men are justified either by the sole imputation of the justice of Christ or by the sole remission of sins, to the exclusion of the grace and the charity which is poured forth in their hearts by the Holy Ghost, . . . let him be anathema.” See John H. Leith, ed., Creeds of the Churches: A Reader in Christian Doctrine from the Bible to the Present (Atlanta: Knox, 1982), 421, emphasis in original.
89 Bloesch, God the Almighty, 234, 235.
90 Blake T. Ostler, “The Development of the Mormon Concept of Grace,” Dialogue 24/1 (1991): 68, 69, 73. Ostler’s article, although notably well researched, is highly problematic on a number of fronts, not the least of which being an overdone contrast between the soteriological paradigms of St. John and St. Paul, an idiosyncratic reading of the undisputed Pauline epistles, and a false dichotomy between salvation viewed as a “state of being” vs. “an ongoing
Mormonism in repeating the theological errors of Catholicism and Orthodoxy. Soteriological paradigms that have theosis as a central feature tend to lose a proper view of justification within the broader picture of eschatological glorification.

Another issue worthy of discussion is the notable absence of deification language in the New Testament. None of the examples cited by Robinson (see pp. 80–82) are conclusive, for, as he admits: "The soil from which the LDS doctrine of deification grows is the belief that humans are of the divine species and that the scriptural language of divine paternity is not merely figurative" (p. 82).91 Those who do not agree with this theological construct are not going to come to the same conclusions regarding the import of the numerous other passages in question (see, e.g., 1 John 3:2; 2 Corinthians 3:18; John 17:22–23; Revelation 3:21; Romans 8:15–17). Such texts suggest deification only to someone who assumes an ontological continuum between God and humans. Such a continuum is ruled out in the first book of the Bible, where the contingent existence of man with relationship to the Deity is clearly laid out: "Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being" (Genesis 2:7).92 Furthermore, the New Testament writers are extremely conservative in their use of the process of growth." Were Ostler to keep justification and sanctification distinct as technical terms (as in Protestantism), many of his theological problems would be solved.

91 Incompatible with a literal paternity of God the Father over humans, we contend that the New Testament consistently teaches that believers become the children of God through adoption and rebirth (compare Romans 8:23; Ephesians 1:5; Titus 3:7; John 1:13; 3:3–8; 1 Peter 1:23; 1 John 2:29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:1-12, 18). People must be spiritually reborn and adopted because they are not God's literal children.

92 This verse indicates that man exists contingent on God's prerogative to create and he exists as a creation and is thereby of a different species of being. The imagery behind this verse is that of a craftsman using his skills at his craft, perhaps of a potter casting a pot; compare Gordon J. Wenham, Genesis 1–15. vol. 1 in Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1987), 59–60; Victor P. Hamilton, The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1990), 156–58. No craftsman creates something that is literally of the same species as himself. At best he can make an image or likeness of himself, and this is what the Bible affirms God did (Genesis 1:26–27).
of the term θεός, using it only rarely even in reference to Jesus.93 The rigid monotheism of earliest Christianity stands in contrast to both paganism, as well as some sectarian strands of Judaism, of the first-century milieu.94 Evangelical Christians wisely choose to follow the example of the primitive church.

**Christ and the Trinity**

Some no doubt would contest the idea that earliest Christianity was rigidly monotheistic. In fact many would see belief in the deity of Jesus and the Spirit as evidence that, as in strands of Second Temple Judaism, the first-century Christians compromised monotheism.95 Peter Hayman asks, "Is there any better explanation for why thousands of Jews in the first century so easily saw Christianity as the fulfillment of Judaism and so easily accepted that

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95 Although at times understating the New Testament evidence for early belief in the deity of Christ, a generally good discussion of this issue from a broadly Evangelical perspective can be found in James D. G. Dunn, *The Parting of the Ways between Christianity and Judaism and Their Significance for the Character of Christianity* (London: SCM, 1991), 207–29.
believing in the divinity of Jesus was perfectly compatible with their ancestral religion?"96 There can be little doubt that Trinitarianism, if not explained very carefully, can indeed appear to be a compromise of monotheistic belief. But if the New Testament is to be taken seriously, it seems necessary that God be worshiped as a Trinity. As Gerald Bray aptly writes:

To a Jew or to a Muslim, this appears to be a denial of monotheism, and it must be admitted that many Christians also find it difficult to hold the Trinity of persons together in the unity of a single divine being. Yet without the Trinity there would be no Christianity. Our belief in the saving work of Christ the Son of God, and in the indwelling presence of God the Holy Spirit demands that we worship God in that way.97

Latter-day Saints have also had their reservations about the Trinity, but for quite different reasons. They have not been concerned about maintaining the ontological unity of the three persons of the Godhead. Rather, their fear has been that the doctrine of the Trinity compromises the true personality of the Father, Son, and Spirit and is in essence a clever modalism. It is often assumed by Latter-day Saints that when orthodox Christians say that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one God that we are saying they are one person.98 But this is to fundamentally misunderstand the

96 Hayman, “Monotheism,” 15. Hayman further suggests: “Until Christianity tried, always unsuccessfully I think [maybe Hayman should think some more], to fit the Holy Spirit into the picture, it did not deviate as far as one might otherwise think from a well established pattern in Judaism” (p. 15).
97 Gerald Bray, The Doctrine of God (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1993), 111.
98 Not just a few (non-Mormons and Mormons alike) are inclined to dismiss the doctrine of the Trinity as expressed by classical Christianity and the creeds (“one God existing as three persons”) as a bald contradiction. It is not uncommon to hear them dismiss the doctrine with the oft-quoted (and arrogant) statement: “Trinitarians are those who don’t know how to count.” But it must be remembered that the delegates attending the early church councils were not so ignorant that they would have embraced an obvious contradiction. If Trinitarianism is so obviously contradictory it becomes extremely difficult to explain the rich intellectual history of trinitarian Christianity. Whether or not one agrees with them, it must be acknowledged that such Trinitarians as Athanasius, Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, and Edwards properly rank among the most intelli-
doctrine and a failure to appreciate the meaning of terms like person.

In this chapter Robinson and Blomberg both do an extremely good job of presenting their views. Robinson's argument centers around two issues: the nature of the unity of the Godhead and the role of the creeds in formulating Trinitarian theology (pp. 127–41). Blomberg focuses on the "mutation" of Jewish monotheism that occurred in early Christianity as a result of their experience of the risen Jesus and the Spirit, along with a critique of the Latter-day Saint view (pp. 111–27). Our own thoughts will likewise center on two issues: (1) the nature of the unity of the Godhead and (2) the relationship of the ecumenical creeds to the doctrinal structure of the Bible.

The Nature of the Unity of the Godhead

Blomberg notes correctly that "the most crucial observation about God to be gleaned from the Old Testament is its unrelenting monotheism. Every day the faithful Jew recited the Shema of Deuteronomy 6:4, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.' There was no more central theological affirmation in the whole of Judaism" (p. 113). It would seem that this is the logical starting point for any discussion of the relationship of God's simultaneous oneness and threeness. Latter-day Saints and Evangelicals are agreed that God is somehow both one and three. Robinson writes, "That God is simultaneously three and one I have no doubt because the Bible and the Book of Mormon both tell me so" (p. 128). It is the nature of God's oneness in particular that is a point of serious difference between our religions. It is difficult to understand, if God's oneness is taken as a starting point, how one might arrive at the view of the Godhead proposed
by the LDS Church. Contrary to Robinson’s claims, the starting point of the Trinitarian view is not Hellenistic philosophy, but rather God’s revelation of himself as fundamentally “one” (Deuteronomy 6:4).

So what is the starting point for the Latter-day Saint view? It is certainly not the Old Testament, nor even the Book of Mormon, for the view of the Godhead defended by most Latter-day Saints (Robinson included) is simply not there. The starting point for the LDS view would appear to be not the Bible itself, but rather Joseph Smith’s later recollections of his first vision. Smith reports: “I saw two Personages, whose brightness and glory defy all description, standing above me in the air” (Joseph Smith—History 1:17). David Paulsen notes: “Joseph Smith’s account of the appearance of God the Father and Jesus Christ to him in the spring of 1820 near Palmyra, New York (the First Vision) has long been understood as initially grounding his belief that both the Father and the Son are embodied.” It seems likely that because of Smith’s report of his experience, Latter-day Saints tend

100 Most Latter-day Saints would readily grant that their theology proper cannot be derived from the present text of the Old Testament. More difficult is the issue of the nature of the Godhead in the Book of Mormon. It seems, however, that the Book of Mormon text does not provide clear support for the present Latter-day Saint view. For a generally good study, see Melodie M. Charles, “Book of Mormon Christology,” in New Approaches to the Book of Mormon: Explorations in Critical Methodology, ed. Brent Lee Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993), 81–114. Charles, of course, is not the only Latter-day Saint to come to this conclusion. John Tvedtnes admits, “there were times in history when the people did not have a clear view of the Godhead as taught in the Latter-day Saint Church today. To the Nephites, it seems clear that the Father and the Son are generally considered to be one God. . . . It is quite likely, then, that the ancient Israelites knew of but one God.” See John A. Tvedtnes, review of New Approaches to the Book of Mormon, in Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 6/1 (1994): 16. Some, however, continue to argue that the Book of Mormon teaching is essentially the same as the modern LDS view. See, for example, Paulsen, “Doctrine of Divine Embodiment,” 13–19; and Robert L. Millet, review of “Book of Mormon Christology,” in Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 6/1 (1994): 187–99.

101 Robinson basically grants the point being argued here when he writes, “We believe this not because it is the clear teaching of the Bible but because it was the personal experience of the prophet Joseph Smith in his first vision” (p. 78).

to begin with the assumption of God’s plurality, and then move from there to explain the nature of the unity. Robinson’s view of the divine unity is fairly straightforward: “However, we believe that the oneness of these three is not an ontological oneness of being (this is a *creedal* rather than a biblical affirmation), but a oneness of mind, purpose, power and intent” (p. 129).103

We might begin by noting that it is necessary to distinguish between a merely “economic” Trinity and an “ontological” Trinity.104 Latter-day Saints could affirm the former but would deny the latter.105 The economic Trinity refers to the basic truth

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103 Orson Pratt offers a similar view, arguing that the oneness of the Godhead is grounded in the indivisibility of the divine attributes: “But because the divisibility of wisdom, truth, or love is impossible, the *whole* of these qualities dwell in the Father—the *whole* dwells in the Son—the *whole* is possessed by the Holy Spirit. . . . If a truth could become three truths, distinct from each other, by dwelling in three persons or substances, then there would be *three* Gods instead of one. But as it is, the Trinity is *three* in essence but *one* in truth and other similar principles.” Pratt, “Absurdities of Immaterialism,” 30.

104 The economic Trinity can also be described as a “functional Trinity” or a “social Trinity.” These descriptions are good insofar as they go, but fail to move on to the next level of relating these metaphors to the unity of God’s inner being.

105 For example, Paulsen explicitly states: “Social trinitarianism holds that the Godhead consists of three separate and distinct persons, or centers of consciousness, who together constitute one perfectly harmonious social unit. This I understand to be LDS doctrine,” “Doctrine of Divine Embodiment,” 14 n. 19. From our perspective Paulsen is correct in this assertion. But it must be recognized that the doctrine of divine embodiment would require the Latter-day Saint articulation of the social Trinity in some respects to be significantly different from most other versions. Millard J. Erickson, an Evangelical holding to a conservative version of the social Trinity, views the possession of physical bodies as a factor that would make the love between the Father, Son, and Spirit incomplete or imperfect just as it is among humans. For Erickson the essential nonembodied character of the members of the Godhead allows for them to interpenetrate one another in such a way that they share in each other’s consciousness and experiences; each is involved in every work of God even if certain works are primarily the doing of one rather than the others, and the three can be referred to as one *being*. (Remember that for the Son his embodiment because of the incarnation is not essential to what he is in himself and his continued embodiment is by choice, not metaphysical necessity.) For Erickson the Trinity is three persons so closely bound together that they are in some way actually one. We have our doubts as to whether even Erickson’s strong doctrine of *perichoresis* (interpenetration or interrelationship) succeeds in making the Father, Son, and Spirit
that God is encountered in the persons of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We are speaking at this point at the level of God’s revelation in three persons, not reflection on his inner being. It is obvious that in the New Testament documents, three persons are presented as Deity (see, e.g., Matthew 28:19; Romans 15:30; 1 Corinthians 12:4–6; 2 Corinthians 13:14; Galatians 4:4–6; Ephesians 2:18; Colossians 1:3–8; 2 Thessalonians 2:13–14; Titus 3:4–7). Thomas F. Torrance writes,

The word “economy” (in its theological sense) is the patristic expression, developed from St. Paul, for the orderly movement in which God actively makes himself known to us in his incarnate condescension and his redemptive activity within the structures of space and time, through Christ and in one Spirit, in such a way as to identify and name himself to us as the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.106

Insofar as Latter-day Saints accept the deity of the three persons in the Godhead, the point of conflict does not really take place on this level. It is when the move is made from the revelation of the three persons to its implications on the divine Being that the paths diverge widely. But for Christian orthodoxy, it is not sufficient to simply declare how God has revealed himself without moving on to the implications of this revelation to the inner life of the Deity. As Torrance notes, “the economic Trinity cannot but point be-

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yond itself to the theological or ontological Trinity, otherwise the economic Trinity would not be a faithful and true revelation of the transcendent Communion of Father, Son and Holy Spirit which the eternal Being of God is in himself.107 In other words, mainstream Christianity insists on a continuity between the manner of God’s self-revelation and what God is in himself. Since we know that God is essentially “one” (Deuteronomy 6:4), the three persons must coexist within God as one Being who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Moses did not declare to the Israelites, “Hear O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is three.”

This is the heart of the Christian usage of the term *homoousios* (“of one substance”) to describe the relationship between the Father and the Son. Unless the Son is the true God, as opposed to some lesser or independent Deity, then redemption is dependent on a being who is unable to effect true reconciliation with the Deity. Union with Christ, as it is described in the New Testament (see Romans 6:5; 1 Corinthians 12:12; Ephesians 1:3-14), would be something less than union with God himself. Salvation would be grounded in a finite source, whereas the Bible declares salvation to be only of the Lord (see Isaiah 43:10–11; Titus 2:13). Unless Jesus is the same Being as the Father, he cannot truly be “God with us” (Matthew 1:23). As Catholic scholar Raymond Brown aptly notes, commenting on the importance of Nicaea, “If Jesus is not ‘true God of true God,’ then we do not know God in human terms. Even if Jesus were the most perfect creature far above all others, he could only tell us second hand about a God who really remains almost as distant as the Unmoved Mover of Aristotle.”108 “Jesus Christ is not a mere symbol, some functional representation of God detached from God, but God in his own Being and Act come among us, exhibiting and expressing in our human form the very Word which he is eternally in

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107 Ibid.
108 Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to New Testament Christology* (New York: Paulist, 1994), 150. We would point out on this that secondhand knowledge of God could only be propositional. The experiential knowledge of God described in the Bible requires direct, unmediated firsthand knowledge of God himself. Jesus did not come to merely tell us what God was like but to show us (compare John 1:18; 14:8–9).
himself.” The difference between viewing God's oneness ontologically and functionally is well summarized by Roger Keller: “For those who hold that God is one in essence, when the Son becomes incarnate, God in his wholeness has truly entered human history. For those who hold that God is one in purpose, when the Son becomes incarnate the majesty of the Godhead enters human history, but not the essence of the one God.” From an Evangelical point of view, what is really at stake in this debate is the reality of the incarnation and atonement.

Nicene orthodoxy affirms that the Father and the Son are of the same identical (not merely similar) Being. This view preserves the monotheism of the Old and New Testaments concurrently with the full deity of Christ better than numerous other constructs, including the monarchistic triad of early apologists such as Justin Martyr and Tertullian, the subordinationist view of the Cappadocian theologians and Eastern Orthodoxy, and modern-

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109 Torrance, Christian Doctrine of God, 95.
110 Keller, Reformed Christians and Mormon Christians, 77.
111 It is commonly argued that since sin offends an infinitely holy God an infinite atonement must be made to appease God's justice. Because of this no one less than God himself has the ability to provide such an atonement. We insist that Jesus was "God of very God" because if he is not then no hope of salvation remains because our sins continue unatoned. Even the Book of Mormon is sympathetic to such concerns: "And now, the plan of mercy could not be brought about except an atonement should be made; therefore God himself atoneth for the sins of the world, to bring about the plan of mercy, to appease the demands of justice, that God might be a perfect, just God, and a merciful God also" (Alma 42:15). "For it is expedient that there should be a great and last sacrifice; yea, not a sacrifice of man, neither of beast, neither of any manner of fowl; for it shall not be a human sacrifice; but it must be an infinite and eternal sacrifice" (Alma 34:10).

112 Bloesch notes: "The apologists of the early church really conceived of a triad rather than a trinity, since the Father was given preeminent ontological status and the Son and Spirit were clearly subordinate to the Father." God the Almighty, 187. For a thorough discussion see J. N. D. Kelly, Early Christian Doctrines, rev. ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), 83–108.

113 See the discussion of Alasdair I. C. Heron, The Holy Spirit: The Holy Spirit in the Bible, the History of Christian Thought, and Recent Theology (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), 80–86. On the Cappadocians see Kelly, Early Christian Doctrines, 258–69. It should be noted that Gregory Nazianzen came closer to Athanasius's view than the other Cappadocians (i.e., Basil, Greg-
day proponents of the so-called “social Trinity.” The view of the Godhead defended by Robinson is similar to all these constructs in that the Latter-day Saint doctrine asserts an ontological subordinationism of the Son to the Father. Robinson expounds his view very clearly: “It is true that Mormons are thoroughly subordinationist in their theology of the Godhead, as were many of the early Church Fathers” (p. 130). He goes on to say that “the divine Son and the divine Holy Spirit are subordinate to the Father and dependent on their oneness with him for their divinity” (p. 132, emphasis added). This view is indeed similar to many of the early fathers, at least with regard to the subordinationism itself. However, this move has huge theological consequences. As Blomberg points out: “If Christ was ever less than fully God


115 Significant differences exist, of course. For example, Justin Martyr did view the Son as ontologically subordinate to and even numerically distinct from the Father, but he also understood Jesus Christ to be the Logos of God, and thus an extension of the Father’s essence rather than a completely separate being, as his own illustrations (word from reason, light from the sun, etc.) make clear. As Kelly notes, for Justin, the Son’s “numerical distinction from the Father does not involve any partition of the latter’s essence.” Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 98. Origen likewise held to a strong subordinationism and was even willing to describe the Son as a “secondary God.” But at the same time he believed that the Son was *eternally* begotten of the Father, an idea that greatly influenced post-Nicene orthodoxy and would not be acceptable to many Latter-day Saints. Again see Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 128–36. Similar differences could be noted with Irenaeus, Tertullian, and other early church fathers.
(even when he assumed a human nature), then he is by definition not the kind of infinite deity necessary to atone for our sins and to pay the infinite price required for our purification” (p. 118). Robinson attempts to answer this by pointing out that it was “the mortal Jesus Christ, in his subordinate state” who purchased our redemption (p. 131). This response fails to keep in mind the fact that Jesus remained fully God during his experience of mortality (see Philippians 2:5–8). Ironically, the Book of Mormon elucidates even more explicitly than the Bible that unless it was the infinite God himself who atoned for our sins, salvation would not have been possible (compare Alma 34:10–14).

The root of this theological error is placing the “fount of divinity” in the _person_ of the Father rather than in the _being_ of the Father, which is also shared fully by the Son. The avoidance of this error is the point of the careful wording of the Nicene Creed: “We believe in . . . one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father as only begotten, that is, _from the essence_ [not the person] _of the Father._”

Thus while we think of the Father within the Trinity as the Principle or Ἄρχη of Deity . . . that is not to be taken to mean that he is the Source (Ἄρχη) or Cause (Ἀτία) of the divine Being (τὸ ἐνα) of the Son and the Spirit, but in respect simply of his being Unoriginate or Father, or expressed negatively, in respect of his not being a Son, although all that the Son has the Father has except Sonship.116

Bloesch likewise insists: “The Father is an originating source not as a first cause in the sense of an efficient cause but as a presupposition or ground.”117

The idea that God is “one” in his essential being, but diverse in personal self-distinction, is seen in Jesus’ own words recorded in John 10:30, where Christ announces rather boldly: “I and the Father are one.” Robinson does not offer any explanation of this particular text, although it is one of the most crucial in the context of this discussion. He does discuss the nature of God’s oneness in

117 Bloesch, _God the Almighty_, 187.
relation to John 14:11 and argues that one should interpret it in light of John 17:21-22 (see p. 130). The logic here appears to us to be faulty. Should not John 17:21-22 rather be interpreted in light of 10:30 and 14:11, since they occur prior in the narrative? When one reads the texts in their proper order, a different picture begins to emerge. Let us begin with John 10:30. We should first note that the theme of this pericope revolves around the identity of Jesus, for he is answering the question of whether or not he is "the Messiah" (John 10:24). In answering the Jews' inquiry, he points out, among other things, that he has the authority to give "eternal life" (John 10:28). Not only can he exercise this divine prerogative, but he implies that he is the most powerful person in the universe, by claiming, "no one shall snatch them out of My hand" (John 10:28); the idea being that no one is powerful enough to do it. It is crucial to read John 10:28 and 29 together, for a clear parallelism between the Son and the Father is evident. Just as no one can snatch them out of the Son's hand, likewise "no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand" (John 10:29). This makes it clear that Jesus is claiming the power to exercise divine prerogatives that might normally be conceived as limited to the Father. Lest anybody miss the full import of Jesus' exalted claims, he goes on to say, "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30). In light of the context, in which Jesus is explaining his identity, and claiming the power and authority which rightly belong to God alone, does it not seem likely that the background to this statement lies precisely in Deuteronomy 6:4? Jesus is claiming, alongside the Father, to be the "one God" of Moses' declaration! This would seem to be precisely how the Jews understood him, for they go on to accuse him explicitly of claiming to be God (see John 10:33). A few verses later, still in the context

118 The Greek text of John 10:30 uses the neuter gender for one, and not the masculine, possibly to avoid the (modalistic) implication that Jesus is claiming to be the same person as the Father. Jesus most likely spoke these words in Aramaic, however, and the allusion to Deuteronomy 6:4 would not have been lost.

119 Latter-day Saints can of course point to the content of John 10:34-36 as evidence that the title god can be applied to others as well. But whatever the implication of these verses for the doctrine of deification (which is certainly open for discussion), the point remains that the status of Jesus is distinguished
of claiming a special exalted status, Jesus says that he wants his listeners to "know and understand that the Father is in me and I in the Father" (John 10:38). In this context then, Jesus is claiming something that makes him unique among all people.

We are now prepared to understand John 14:11 where Jesus says, "Believe Me that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me." Here again it seems evident that Jesus is claiming something unique. This whole section (see John 14:1–15) revolves around the theme of "believing" in Jesus as the unique agent of God's redemption. In John 14:16–21 he goes on to teach about the future ministry of the Holy Spirit, "another Helper" (John 14:16), who will mediate the very presence of the risen Christ to the disciples (see John 14:18). Through the indwelling ministry of the Spirit, there will be such intimate union between the Savior and his followers that Jesus can say, "In that day you shall know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you" (John 14:20). This statement does not negate the previous teaching concerning the unique role and status of Jesus; rather, it grounds the gift of the Spirit and the resulting union of the risen Christ with his disciples in the unique ontological status of Jesus as the one whom to know is to know the Father (see John 14:9–10). Torrance beautifully captures this truth when he writes: "We found that 'I am who I am / I will be who I will be' [Exodus 3:14] is not to be understood simply in terms of God's self-grounded Being, but as the Being of God for others with whom he seeks and creates fellowship, although this for others is to be regarded as flowing freely from the ground and will of his own transcendent Self-Being."120 In other words: it is Christ's status as the one who uniquely indwells and is indwelt by the Father that is the basis on which Jesus can send the Spirit and effect the kind of wonderful union between God and man described in John 14:20. It is this same beautiful fellowship between God and his people, effected by the Spirit (see John 16:13; compare 17:17) and described in John 17:21–22, that by no means teaches that we shall be united with the Father in the

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120 Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 163.
Godhead the same way the Son is;\textsuperscript{121} but rather that the Son’s union with the Father is the theological basis for our own union with God and one another.

We conclude, despite Robinson’s well-argued presentation, that the nature of the unity of the Godhead is an ontological oneness of essence or “being,” and not merely a moral unity of mind, purpose, power, and intent. The New Testament seems to reveal a God who is essentially “one,” while concurrently active among men in three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.\textsuperscript{122}

\textsuperscript{121} Latter-day Saints of course would agree that we will never join the Godhead, so even they must in some sense distinguish the Son’s oneness with the Father from our own. Doctrine and Covenants 93 seems to say that the Son received the Father’s “fulness” \textit{directly}, whereas all others receive the “fulness” of the Father through union with the Son (compare D&C 93:3-4, 19-22).

\textsuperscript{122} The abbreviated form of this conception is “one \textit{Being}, three persons.” Robinson (see p. 130) and most Latter-day Saints object to speaking of a oneness of \textit{being}. But this seems to provide a better explanation for how God can be both one and three at the same time, than can a mere oneness of purpose and like qualities. How exactly does being one in “purpose” with the Father make the Son and the Father “one” (i.e., the same) God? Or are the Father and Son somehow “one” God, yet not the same God? The kind of distinctions between \textit{being} and \textit{person} that are employed in Christian theology seem demanded by the data of the New Testament. A oneness of “\textit{being}” between the Father and the Son likewise seems to be taught in the Book of Mormon. How else is one to explain the unnatural use of a singular verb for the plural subject, which Robinson himself points out in 2 Nephi 31:21 (see p. 129)? Notice further the words of Abinadi in Mosiah 15:1-4, where he explains how God can at the same time be both the Father and the Son. Please notice that the issue at stake is \textit{not} how Jesus can be both a Father and a Son, as some have attempted to argue. Abinadi is depicted as saying: “God himself shall come down among the children of men \ldots \textit{being} the Father and the Son.” Does this not plainly claim that the nature of God consists of Father and Son who exist in a oneness of \textit{being}? LDS readers should furthermore keep in mind that some very important Latter-day Saint thinkers have themselves employed similar concepts, such as distinguishing between the one-God nature, and the incarnations of that nature in individual intelligences. See, for example, Roberts, \textit{Mormon Doctrine of Deity}, 162-66; Roberts, \textit{The Truth, the Way, the Life}, ed. Welch, 166-68, 227-29; Orson Pratt, “Great First Cause or the Self-Moving Forces of the Universe,” in \textit{Orson Pratt’s Works}, 1-16. For a discussion see Blake Ostler, “The Idea of Pre-existence in the Development of Mormon Thought,” in \textit{Dialogue} 15/1 (1982): 59–78.
The Bible and the Creeds

Robinson maintains that Latter-day Saints can accept the formula “one God in three persons.” But he rejects the notion of ontological oneness we argued for above. Why? In his words, “this is a creedal rather than a biblical affirmation” (p. 129, emphasis in original). He also points out (as we did above) that the Latter-day Saint type of subordinationism was common in the early church.123 Robinson notes that these understandings of God would later be considered unorthodox by the standard of Nicene [and Chalcedonian] orthodoxy (see p. 131). We agree that a number of the church fathers developed theories to explain the oneness and threeness of the members of the Godhead that were unorthodox. However, these various theories were insufficient for very good reasons, the main one being that they simply did not incorporate all the relevant biblical data, just as we do not think the Latter-day Saint view does.124 Writing from an Evangelical perspective, Gerald Bray makes an observation similar to Robinson’s, but adds this very important qualification: “There were many theories which though popular at first eventually had to be condemned as heretical, when it was realized that they contained assumptions and implications which were not compatible with authentic Christian witness to Jesus.”125

Robinson contends that modern critics of Mormonism apply a different standard to post-Nicene Latter-day Saints than they do to the ante-Nicene fathers. He asks, “If pre-Nicene mainstream Christians, like Justin Martyr, Irenaeus or Eusebius of Caesarea, can be thoroughly unorthodox in their view of the Godhead (by post-Nicene standards) without being declared heretical, then is it not unfair to demonize the LDS for the same point of view?”

123 Robinson’s own phrase is actually “the earliest Christian church” (p. 131). We do not believe that the writings of the earliest Christians, the apostles, contain such views.

124 Whether or not the purported revelations unique to the LDS Church add information relevant to the doctrine, if these revelations in fact are from God, then they cannot contradict God’s previous revelation in the Bible. And, no matter what relevant data could be added to what we know, it is still necessary to incorporate all the data, including the biblical data, into our understanding of God—at least if God reveals himself truthfully and consistently.

125 Bray, The Doctrine of God, 125.
(p. 131). But an important distinction is to be made between the two. Again Bray writes, "But unlike modern heresies, which are conscious deviations from a received tradition, these ancient heresies were more like false trails pursued by people who wished to be orthodox, but who lacked the conceptual framework needed to express orthodoxy in the right way."\(^{126}\) The context in which the pre-Nicene fathers presented suborthodox views of God is very different from the context into which Mormonism was born and lives. Anyone living after the many debates over how best to state the biblical doctrine is more accountable to believe that doctrine than someone living before who did not have the advantage of the church’s collective thought on the matter.

The fact is—and we doubt that Robinson or any Latter-day Saint would want to deny it—that the revelation of God in Christ is utterly profound. More than that, it is the most profound thing in existence. There should not be any surprise, then, if it took the Christian church quite some time before they were confident enough in their basic understanding of it to summarize it in creedal form. Remember that when the New Testament was written and first read its message was revolutionary. It completely scandalized the Jews and perplexed the Greeks (compare 1 Corinthians 1:23). That the God of Israel came to earth as a man to atone for the sin of the world, nullifying the sacrificial system and proclaiming the presence of the kingdom of heaven, was a notion not readily comprehended by anyone. Neither Greek nor Hebrew thought currently contained the conceptual framework necessary to properly and fully incorporate the various components of this most profound of mysteries.

The creeds of the church are not the product of pagan Hellenistic philosophy, as Robinson repeatedly asserts and intimates.\(^{127}\) Rather, these creeds are the fruit of the collective efforts of the early Christians’ attempts to grapple with and properly understand the fresh revelation of God found in the New Testament. On the one hand Christianity began with the monotheism inherited from Judaism and struggled to incorporate into it the full experience of God manifest in Christ through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

\(^{126}\) Ibid., emphasis added.

\(^{127}\) The appendix to this review is a discussion devoted to this claim.
On the other hand Christians sought to defend this revelation against the incessant attacks and ridicule of the Greeks. This twofold struggle caused the early Christians to develop new intellectual frameworks and to modify existing categories, both Greek and Hebrew, in an attempt to present the fullness of the gospel in all its purity and power. It was not a matter of trying to appear wise according to the world’s standards (see 1 Corinthians 1:18–31); God’s honor was at stake (compare 1 Samuel 17:26).

Is it in fact the case that in the midst of this struggle, the earliest Christian understanding of God was lost and replaced by un-biblical Hellenistic thought forms? What are we to make of the Nicene Creed and its use of philosophical terminology such as ousia, homoousios, and hypostasis? Should we take the Nicene Creed and the Definition of Chalcedon as “well-intentioned attempts to make sense of the biblical data in ways that frequently turn out to be right,” as Blomberg advises (p. 113)? Or is Robinson closer to the mark when he asserts that “those creeds imposed nonbiblical concepts on the biblical data, and they used nonbiblical terms—trinity, homoousios, consubstantial, ungenerated, indivisible and so forth—in doing it” (p. 130)?

It seems to us that Robinson jumps too quickly from the obvious use of nonbiblical terms (which can readily be granted) to the assumption of nonbiblical concepts (which needs to be proved, not asserted). When considering the use of theological terminology, one must keep in mind that the Nicene Creed was birthed in the midst of controversy, and its framers did not necessarily have the luxury of choosing the terms of the debate, which were largely predetermined by the recent outbreak of what was an extremely persuasive adaptation of Christian theology to the thought forms of Greek philosophy: Arianism. The denial of the full deity of Christ by Arius was based on a fundamental premise, described by J. N. D. Kelly as “the affirmation of the absolute uniqueness and transcendence of God, the unoriginate source ... of all reality.” In keeping with this assumption, Arius insisted that “the contingent world could not bear His direct impact.”128 Therefore, whatever was involved in the incarnation of Christ, it could not have

128 Kelly, Early Christian Doctrines, 227. For an overview of the issues at stake at the Nicene council, see 223–51.
been the actual event of God himself becoming a man and suffering for the sins of the world, for such an experience would be metaphysically impossible for God. Arius further operated on a second assumption, which in many ways set the terms of the Nicene debate. Gerald Bray explains:

Arius, however, was an Aristotelian who believed that if it was necessary to use a different name to describe an object, that object had to be a different thing (ousia). If it was necessary, as all were agreed, to maintain a distinction between the names Father, Son and Holy Spirit, then logically there must be some real difference between them as beings. To Arius this meant that the three persons could not share equally in the same divine ousia, which by definition was unique.129

Athanasius, who served as the primary theological opponent to Arianism in the fourth-century debates, can be seen in this light as a defender of the reality of God’s true incarnation in the person of Jesus Christ against the inroads of Greek metaphysical speculation. Philip Edgcumbe Hughes writes: “So also the roots of Arianism, whose subtle formulations caused a crisis in the church of the fourth century, can be traced back to the theories of Greek philosophy. It was such Hellenizing movements that were decisively denounced and repudiated as heretical by the church’s first four general councils.” Thus it must be insisted that “to maintain, as it is now fashionable to do in some academic circles, that the creedal documents of Nicea and Chalcedon represent a capitulation to Greek thought and the Hellenization of the church is to turn things upside down.”130

This does not deny the rather obvious fact that some of the key terminology used in these early formulations was appropriated from the stock of Greek philosophy. But this does not necessarily mean that the conceptual baggage of those terms remained the same when applied in the context of Christian thought. As the study of linguistics has reminded biblical scholars and

129 Bray, The Doctrine of God, 127.
130 Philip E. Hughes, “The Truth of Scripture and the Problem of Historical Relativity,” in Scripture and Truth, 189, 188.
theologians, words derive their meaning primarily from their context of usage. And in this case the orthodox fathers were concerned to repudiate the inappropriate philosophical deductions which Arius and others were drawing from the standard vocabulary of theological discourse at that time.131 Torrance explains this phenomenon:

Thus while the early theologians of the Church, like the evangelists and the apostles, made considerable use of Greek terms and ideas in seeking to articulate the conceptual content of the Gospel, they reshaped them in a very basic way under the impact of the Holy Scripture. As we have seen, ‘being’, ‘word’, ‘act’, and other common words in Greek patristic theology came to mean something very different from what they meant in Platonic, Aristotelian, or Stoic thought: they are in fact radically ‘un-Greek’. Hence, far from Nicene theology resulting from a Hellenisation [sic] of biblical Christianity, there took place in it a Christian recasting of familiar Hellenic thought-forms in order to make them vehicles of the saving truth of the Gospel, and to enable the Church to clarify and give consistent expression to the trinitarian structure inherent in evangelical knowledge of God.132

It is the doctrine that Christ is actually “of the same essence” (homoousios) with the Father which seems to be the real point of contention with many Latter-day Saints.133 No doubt it caused

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131 Kelly writes of the Arian party, “Rationalists at heart, they started from a priori ideas of divine transcendence and creation. . . . In Athanasius’s approach philosophical and cosmological considerations played a very minor part, and his guiding thought was the conviction of redemption.” Early Christian Doctrines, 243.


133 The idea itself is based on a principle that should be familiar to Latter-day Saints, namely that the difference between things which are made and things which are begotten is that “the thing which is begotten partakes of the very nature of him who begets, while that which is made may not.” Roberts, The Truth, the Way, the Life, ed. Welch, 249, emphasis added. It is for this reason that no knowledgeable Latter-day Saint would describe the Son of God as created; nor would any other intelligence properly be described as such.
quite a stir in the early church as well. The concept, however, is
grounded in the continuity between the “Being” of God and the
“Being” of the Son revealed in the Bible. For Athanasius, the de-
finitive self-revelation of God is contained in Exodus 3:14, where
the Deity reveals his name to Moses as “I AM WHO I AM.” God is
fundamentally to be understood as “the one who is.” In
John’s Gospel Jesus alludes to Exodus 3:14 in numerous places
(see, e.g., John 6:51; 8:12, 28; 9:5; 10:7), thereby identifying him-
self as the one revealed to Moses. No doubt the clearest allusion is
in John 8:58 where Jesus declares, “Truly, truly, I say to you, be-
fore Abraham was born, I AM.” His hearers knew good and well
what he was claiming, for we are told next that the Jews “picked
up stones to throw at Him” (John 8:59). The self-perception
of Jesus evidenced in the Johannine “I am” statements was the
key to the homoousios concept for Athanasius, not Greek phi-
losophy. Once again Torrance explains:

Athanasius shows that the word ousia (ὁ०ςία), de-
"rued from the verb ἐλέυατ, to be, with the quite straight-
forward meaning of be-ing (ὁν), is to be understood in
terms of the divine ‘I am’ (Ἐγώ ἐλέυατ); and at the
same time he relates it to the fact that Jesus Christ is of
one and the same being as God the Father. Moreover,
he follows this up with another passage in which he
points out that the ‘I am’ sayings of Christ can be
understood only in terms of his being homoousios with

134 Many of the theologians involved in the fourth-century controversy
were not Arians, but neither were they comfortable with the homoousion con-
cept, since it seemed to them to go beyond the explicit teaching of scripture and
entailed inappropriate dogmatism concerning the manner of the Son’s genera-
tion. This party preferred to speak of the Son as “of like essence” (homoiousios)
as the Father. Cyril of Jerusalem was an important member of this party. See
Kelly, Early Christian Doctrines, 249–51. Latter-day Saint Christology seems
to be closer to the middle-road (homoiousios) position of the fourth century than
to the Arian point of view.

135 For a good discussion of Exodus 3:14 and its implications for classi-

136 Some Latter-day Saints may simply respond that this does not reveal
any oneness of being between the Son and the Father, since Jesus was himself
the God of the Old Testament. However it should be kept in mind that it is Elo-
him who is talking with Moses in Exodus 3:14.
God. Thus the 'I am' of God and the 'I am' of Christ in their bearing upon one another determined for Athanasius, as they must surely do for us, the Christian understanding of the divine Being or οὐσία as living self-revealing and self-affirming personal Being.¹³⁷

This demonstrates that the *homoousios* concept was advocated on the etymological grounds of the Bible’s own language.¹³⁸

We feel that in light of these considerations, it simply will not do to write off the theology expressed in the ecumenical creeds as the result of philosophical speculation. They seem to be fundamentally the result of biblical reflection, albeit cast in terms of the prevailing theological discourse of the time.¹³⁹

**Salvation**

In this chapter we found the divide between Blomberg and Robinson to be the narrowest. Evangelicals will find that in many ways Robinson’s presentation alleviates some fears and concerns they have had about the LDS doctrine of salvation. As Blomberg notes concerning Robinson’s writings, the reason is that, “Over and over again he comes tantalizingly close to historic Christian affirmations of salvation by grace alone” (p. 179). Whether or not what Robinson describes has always been Latter-day Saint theology, or even if he represents what most Latter-day Saints cur-

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¹³⁸ Readers who do not know Greek might not readily follow what Athanasius was arguing. The Greek words in the Torrance quotation are all different forms of the verb *to be*. Great variety in the form of the verb *to be* is found in Greek just as in English (e.g., *is, was, are, were, be, being*). What Athanasius showed was that Jesus referred to himself with the same title/name that God the Father had revealed to Moses, which was a form of *to be*. He then made the observation that the word *ousia* (ουσία) was derived from the same verb and that to say that Jesus and the Father were of the same *ousia* (the literal meaning of *homoousios*) was implied in the sharing of this name.
rently believe, we leave for others to determine. We are encouraged by what we read if Robinson’s views are in fact representative of the direction in which Latter-day Saint theology is headed.\footnote{It does look as though Robinson’s views may well reflect the direction of Latter-day Saint thought. Some Evangelicals have doubted that the views expressed in his essay are reflective of a larger trend within the church, but a reading of the current literature shows that Robinson is not alone. For example, see Gerald N. Lund, Jesus Christ: Key to the Plan of Salvation (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1991); and Donald P. Mangum and Brenton G. Yorgason, Amazing Grace: The Tender Mercies of the Lord (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1996). Both of these books are explicitly designed to curb tendencies within Mormonism to view salvation as something which must be merited, rather than a free gift. For more on this trend, see O. Kendall White, Mormon Neo-orthodoxy: A Crisis Theology (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987). 148-53.}

**Blomberg’s Survey of Evangelicalism**

Blomberg’s essay has to cover a great deal of territory. Rather than present only what he believes to be the correct view of salvation, he chooses instead to describe the various understandings of it represented in modern Evangelicalism. It appears that this approach was chosen, in part, to show LDS readers that Mormonism has closer affinities with certain segments of Evangelicalism than they might realize.\footnote{However, while this is a strength of Blomberg’s approach, his essay was also weakened because he submitted all these options rather than merely presenting his own position as Robinson did. Latter-day Saint readers are particularly shortchanged because they do not get to read a full presentation of an Evangelical doctrine of salvation.} He begins by describing the differences between Calvinism and Arminianism (see pp. 167–69). Strict Calvinists are known for teaching the total depravity of man, whereby they maintain that humans are sinful and wholly unable to merit salvation. They teach that God has unconditionally chosen (elected or predestined) those whom he will graciously save, and maintain that the atonement of Christ is intentionally definite in its application only to the elect of God. When the Spirit of God calls a person to salvation, Calvinists believe that that person will not resist God’s grace and will necessarily respond with saving faith. Finally, Calvinists believe that those who have been truly saved by God will not forfeit that gift but will inevitably persevere in faith...
to the end. However, Arminianism is much more similar to Mormonism than is Calvinism. In its strictest form Arminianism rejects all five of the above-mentioned Calvinist doctrines. More generally, Arminians are characterized by their rejection of predestination and a strong emphasis on man’s freewill, much as one finds in Latter-day Saint doctrine.

Blomberg likewise discusses what is often called the Lordship salvation controversy (see p. 169). Some Evangelicals are divided concerning whether or not a person may accept Jesus merely as Savior in order to be saved or if he must also confess him as Lord. Proponents of the first position emphasize the free nature of salvation and want to guard the truth that we do not merit salvation in any way. Proponents of the second position are afraid this has gone beyond guarding that precious truth and has degenerated into the preaching of cheap grace. Latter-day Saints will find close affinity with the Lordship salvation position. Blomberg also

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142 An excellent and full-onbed presentation and defense of Calvinism appears in The Grace of God, the Bondage of the Will, 2 vols., ed. Schreiner and Ware.

143 However, very few are Arminians in the strictest sense. Almost all who characterize themselves as Arminian would accept the doctrine of total depravity but would modify it slightly. Likewise, many Arminians would accept or modify one or more of the other five points of Calvinism. It should further be remembered that Calvinism and Arminianism are systems of theology that have influenced one another in other areas as well; note especially the influence of Calvinism on Arminianism. See J. K. Grider, “Arminianism,” in the Evangelical Dictionary of Theology, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1984), 79-81.

144 A good presentation of Arminianism can be found in Clark H. Pinnock, ed., Grace Unlimited (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1975); and Clark H. Pinnock, ed., The Grace of God, the Will of Man: A Case for Arminianism (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1989).

145 We should point out that the non-Lordship position is a minority fringe position within Evangelicalism. In our opinion, to say that one can be saved without submitting to the Lordship of Christ or without producing good works as the fruit of faith is a blatant heresy of the first order. For a devastating refutation of the non-Lordship view, see John F. MacArthur Jr., The Gospel according to Jesus, rev. and exp. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1994); and John F. MacArthur Jr., Faith Works: The Gospel according to the Apostles (Dallas: Word, 1993). Also see John H. Gerstner, Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth: A Critique of Dispensationalism (Brentwood, Tenn.: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1991). 209-59.
mentions divisions within Evangelicalism on the relationship of baptism to salvation (see pp. 169–70), the possibility of salvation for those who never heard the gospel (see pp. 170–73) and whether degrees of reward and punishment are present in the afterlife (see pp. 173–74).

A Summary of Robinson’s Soteriology

Robinson basically suggests that Latter-day Saints and Evangelicals often fail to communicate when discussing soteriological (i.e., “salvation”) issues because the two groups use terms differently (see p. 155) and because Latter-day Saints tend to be less sophisticated when it comes to “theological” discussions (p. 156). “LDS terminology often seems naïve, 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” (p. 156). Much of Robinson’s own work can be viewed as a solid step forward by a Latter-day Saint to present LDS soteriology precisely and with carefully defined terminology.

146 We have no room here for an extended discussion of water baptism. Suffice it to say that to the present reviewers it seems that Evangelicals tend to have a very watered-down understanding of the importance of this rite. Anyone who would grant that a person could actually refuse baptism and still be regarded as a Christian needs to go back and read the New Testament with his or her eyes open. We do not believe that the New Testament contains a doctrine of “baptismal regeneration” as taught in Lutheranism, Episcopalianism, and Roman Catholicism. Still, the Bible clearly indicates that baptism is the definitive initiation rite of the visible Christian community—not walking down an aisle and “asking Jesus into your heart” (whatever that means). As Oscar Brooks says, “Baptism is the concrete expression of the moral choice that has been made. It vividly portrays in time and space the inner decision made by the participant.” In other words, it is baptism that dramatizes the act of deciding for Christ. See Oscar S. Brooks, The Drama of Decision: Baptism in the New Testament (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1987), 31, emphasis added; and G. R. Beasley-Murray, Baptism in the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1973), 263–75, 296–305.

147 Robinson seems to grant here that “centuries” of arguing about theological terminology can lead to greater precision of articulation. We would agree and might suggest that this provides a good analogy for what was going on in the Christological controversies of the fourth and fifth centuries.
Robinson’s full soteriology can be pieced together on the basis of his numerous writings. In addition to How Wide the Divide? and Are Mormons Christians? which are familiar to many, Robinson has also expressed his views in Believing Christ, Following Christ, the Encyclopedia of Mormonism entry entitled “LDS Doctrine Compared with Other Christian Doctrines,” and a review of Blake Ostler’s article, “The Book of Mormon as a Modern Expansion of an Ancient Source.”

First, in Robinson’s understanding, salvation must be placed within a “covenantal” framework. Redemption is rooted in God’s initiative (he is the suzerain), but we must willingly enter into the cooperative agreement (we are the vassals). Although in our present state we are subject to the effects of sin because of our mortality inherited from Adam, this is not the same as the classical Christian doctrine of original sin, for the atonement of Christ removes the guilt of Adam’s transgression for all mankind, regardless of their response to the gospel. The atonement of Christ furthermore rectifies the effects of Adam’s fall to such a degree that a specific work of grace is not necessary to enable a person to respond to God. The will of man is not in bondage. God does not move upon the will in an irresistible manner, but respects the free agency that man possesses by virtue of having been organized out of uncreated intelligence. God extends an invitation of reconciliation to all, and all have it within their power to accept the gracious offer by believing in Christ, repenting of their sins, and submitting to water baptism (see

148 Several of these have already been mentioned in the course of this review. The bibliographical information for the remainder is as follows: Stephen E. Robinson, Believing Christ: The Parable of the Bicycle and Other Good News (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992); Following Christ: The Parable of the Divers and More Good News (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1995); and “Doctrine: LDS Doctrine Compared with Other Christian Doctrines,” in Encyclopedia of Mormonism, 1:399–402.

149 See Robinson, Believing Christ, 35–55.
150 See Robinson, Following Christ, 43–64.
152 See Robinson, review of Blake Ostler’s article, 408.
154 See Robinson, review of Blake Ostler’s article, 408.
pp. 157–58). Yet these acts themselves do not merit salvation, but rather are markers of sincerity and a willingness to take upon oneself the covenant obligations outlined in scripture. Once a person has entered the covenant, he or she is now obligated to act as a thankful vassal, and to work toward perfection. Such perfection involves a long process, however, which will extend even beyond this mortal experience; in the interim, Christ’s perfection makes up what we presently lack. It is Christ’s merits alone that make us acceptable (i.e., justified) before God (see pp. 143–44, 158–59) as we work toward the eschatological goal of deification. If a person chooses to forsake Christ and walk in willful disobedience to God’s commandments, he has broken the terms of the covenant and is no longer eligible for the blessings of salvation promised to those who remain faithful.

157 See Robinson, Believing Christ, 47–55.
158 See Robinson, Following Christ, 65–90.
159 See Robinson, Believing Christ, 85–108.
161 See Robinson, Following Christ, 21–42. Within Robinson’s soteriology, as with much LDS talk on the issue, one notices an emphasis on the covenant and the role of good works as marks of covenantal loyalty. This language is very close to what has been termed in recent years covenantal nomism (“nomism” transliterates the Greek word for “law” νόμος). Proponents of the so-called “New Perspective on Paul” argue that the Judaism of the first century was not a system of legalism or works righteousness as traditionally assumed. Further, they argue, good works were not viewed as something whereby one earned or merited salvation. They were in no way the basis or means whereby one entered into the covenant. The covenantal relationship was set up by God with the nation of Israel by a sheer act of his grace, and no one was worthy to be in it. But once in the covenant they were obliged to do good works as indicative of their intention to stay within the covenant. According to this view, the law was necessary for salvation but it operated only within the covenant of grace. The principal proponent of the New Perspective, E. P. Sanders, in Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 75, defines covenantal nomism as “the view that one’s place in God’s plan is established on the basis of the covenant and that the covenant requires as the proper response of man his obedience to its commandments, while providing means of atonement for transgression.” He further claims that “the intention and effort to be obedient [to the commandments] constitute the condition for remaining in the covenant, but they do not earn it” (ibid., 180, emphasis in original). Compare this with Robinson: “We can by our works, by our best efforts, only confirm our loyalty to our Savior and our desire to continue being justified by his
Arminianism and Mormonism

It is no doubt obvious to anyone reading Stephen Robinson's presentation that the views therein expressed are much more similar to Evangelical Arminian soteriology than to Calvinism. "The astute reader will recognize that in this (and many other theological points) the LDS view is thoroughly Arminian" (p. 146). He writes in another place, "Continued faithfulness is required in order not to fall from grace after we have been saved. This is Arminianism, not synergism" (p. 159). It is our perception, having closely followed Robinson's writings over a period of time, that a shift has taken place in his thinking over the years. In his review of Ostler's article in 1989, he denies the proposed connection between the scheme of salvation presented in the Book of Mormon and Arminian theology.162 Robinson grants that Arminianism and Mormonism both deny the central tenets of Calvinism, but he goes on to point out that this would also be true for "Pelagius and the semi-Pelagians down to Erasmus and Carlstadt."163 He continues: "Therefore, to say that the Book of Mormon is Arminian is nothing more than to say that it teaches moral agency and a universal atonement, although in a fashion and with a logic

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162 Ostler had argued that the Book of Mormon anachronistically demonstrates the direct influence of Arminian theology. See Ostler, "The Book of Mormon as a Modern Expansion," 79–80.

totally distinct from that of Arminius himself.”164 Robinson notes in this regard that Arminius’s views on original sin are “a far cry from the LDS belief that all men benefit from the Atonement through which no one will suffer for Adam’s sin.”165 With respect to freedom of the will: “For Arminius human beings, though ‘free,’ have no power to choose the good in any degree whatsoever without first receiving divine grace. Without grace man is not free to choose the good, or indeed, to choose at all. This is hardly the Book of Mormon doctrine of free agency.”166 In 1991 Robinson came out with his groundbreaking book Are Mormons Christians? There one finds a somewhat different sentiment expressed: “The specific LDS view may be right or wrong from the viewpoint of a particular denomination, but the fundamental LDS belief regarding grace and works is well within the spectrum of traditional Christianity, with strong affinities to the Wesleyan position.”167 Now in 1997, in How Wide the Divide? Robinson flatly describes his views on the danger of falling from grace and “many other theological points” as “thoroughly Arminian” (p. 146, emphasis added).

In many ways, Robinson’s view of salvation is well within the realm of orthodoxy; particularly regarding the subject of “justification.” He plainly denies that we are justified by our own merits, or that works are even necessary to qualify (see pp. 158–59).168 We would further agree with Robinson that this is what the Book of Mormon itself teaches. A few brush strokes in the larger portrait, however, will reveal fundamental differences between the Latter-day Saint view (as represented by Robinson) and Evangelical Arminianism. These differences really relate more to the area

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164 Ibid., 408–09, emphasis added.
165 Ibid., 408, emphasis added.
166 Ibid., emphasis added.
168 Colin B. Douglas of the Church Curriculum Department declares a similar view, namely that justification “is given as a gift by grace, since fallen man must rely ‘alone upon the merits of Christ’ (1 Ne. 10:6; Moro. 6:4). The faith by which one receives this grace manifests itself in an active determination to follow Christ in all things.” See “Justification,” in Encyclopedia of Mormonism, 2:776.
of “anthropology” than “soteriology.” It seems to us that the LDS view expressed in Robinson’s writings combines an orthodox Arminian soteriology with an unorthodox semi-Pelagian anthropology. Jacob Arminius and John Wesley were both agreed that Adam’s sin brought the entire race down to ruin. Apart from divine grace and initiative, man cannot make any moves toward God or perform any work of righteousness. That is why a work of grace is necessary to enable a person to receive the truth of the gospel or perform any righteous act. Arminianism affirms that prevenient grace is rooted in the atonement, and is available to everyone who does not quench the Spirit, but it does not teach that Christ’s atonement actually nullifies the effects of Adam’s fall. The effects of the fall remain, which is why grace is necessary to account for man’s conscience and his responsibility

169 The terms anthropology and soteriology refer to the topics in systematic theology that deal with the doctrines of man’s nature and salvation (respectively). For good presentations of both subjects from a Calvinistic perspective, see Anthony A. Hoekema, Created in God’s Image (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1986) and Anthony A. Hoekema, Saved by Grace (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1989).

170 Semi-Pelagianism can be defined as the view that “though a sickness is inherited through Adam’s sin, human free will has not been entirely obliterated. Divine grace is indispensable for salvation, but it does not necessarily need to precede a free human choice, because, despite the weakness of human volition, the will takes the initiative toward God.” Richard Kyle, “Semi-Pelagianism,” in Evangelical Dictionary of Theology, 1000. Compare Robinson’s analogy in the “parable of the bicycle” where the Savior is presented as asking, “How much do you have? How much can fairly be expected of you? You give me exactly that much (the whole sixty-one cents) and do all you can do, and I will provide the rest for now”; Believing Christ, 33, emphasis in original. This clearly implies, as Blomberg points out (see p. 180), that we are by nature able to contribute something, however little, without a special work of grace. This is quite different from Arminius and Wesley, who both affirmed that prevenient grace was necessary to overcome man’s sinful disposition. In the Latter-day Saint view, the bondage of the will is universally unshackled by the atonement (see 2 Nephi 2:26–27).

to respond to the call of the gospel. The great Methodist theologian John Miley wrote of total depravity:

[It is] a doctrine so uniformly accepted and maintained by orthodox Churches that it may properly be called catholic [i.e., universal]. The doctrine is, that man is utterly evil; that all the tendencies and impulses of his nature are toward the evil; that he is powerless for any good, without any disposition to the good, and under a moral necessity of sinning. . . . On this question Arminianism differs little from Augustinianism.172

Article VIII of John Wesley’s 1784 statement of faith clarifies the concept of free will:

The condition of man after the fall of Adam is such that he can not turn and prepare himself, by his own natural strength and works, to faith and calling upon God; wherefore we have no power to do good works, pleasant and acceptable to God, without the grace of God by Christ preventing [i.e., going before] us.173

As Robinson points out in his review of Ostler, the LDS Church denies that prevenient grace is necessary to enable a man to respond to God. As Ostler himself points out elsewhere, the Book of Mormon does not teach that people are sinful by nature because of Adam’s transgression. He writes,

Because of the atonement, all persons are delivered from their servitude to the devil and evil natures and made free to act for themselves. . . . Therefore, no person, according to the Book of Mormon, is actually evil because of a depraved nature. At birth, all are automatically delivered by the atonement of Christ from the servitude to evil and all of the effects of the Fall.174

Thus, whereas Arminianism grounds free will in the prevenient grace of God, Mormonism grounds free will in the nature of man and preserves it by the atonement.175 Latter-day Saint doctrine bases man’s free agency in human nature with the notion that a part of man is coeternal with God himself. Robinson writes,

Human intelligence is uncreated by God, and therefore independent of his control. Thus Mormons insist that human beings are free agents in the fullest sense, and deny both the doctrines of prevenient and irresistible grace, which make God’s choice determinative for salvation or damnation.176

This unique understanding of the benefits of the atonement and the eternal nature of human intelligence reveals fundamental differences between Latter-day Saint anthropology and Arminian anthropology. Insofar as Robinson and others deny that prevenient grace is necessary for men to do good or respond to the gospel, the LDS Church appears to hold to a semi-Pelagian understanding of man’s nature. Such notions not only appear to conflict with the plain teaching of scripture (see, e.g., Jeremiah 10:23; 13:23; John 6:65; Acts 11:18; 16:14; Romans 9:16), but have been condemned by the Christian church since the Council of Orange (A.D. 529). Canon 6 of that council reads as follows:

If anyone says that God has mercy upon us when, apart from his grace, we believe, will, desire, strive, labor, pray, watch, study, seek, ask, or knock, but does not confess that it is by the infusion and inspiration of the Holy Spirit within us that we have the faith, the will, or the strength to do all these things as we ought; or if anyone makes the assistance of grace depend on the humility or obedience of man and does not agree that it is a gift of grace itself that we are obedient and hum-

175 "Mormon scriptures acknowledge a notion of grace that restores persons to the power of acting for themselves and of choosing good or evil prior to any human action. In some respects, this notion of grace is similar to prevenient grace; however, it differs significantly in that it does not involve God’s moving the human will to faith.” Ostler, “Mormon Concept of Grace,” 81.

ble, he contradicts the Apostle who says, “What hast thou that thou hast not received?” (I Cor. 4:7), and, “By the grace of God, I am what I am” (I Cor. 15:10).177

It is this crucial difference between Mormonism and Arminianism that marks the dividing line between synergism and monergism.

Postmortem Salvation

The possibility of postmortem salvation might seem to be an attractive belief. With such a belief one does not need to worry about the fate of those who did not hear and have a chance to respond to the gospel or of beloved family members who failed to respond positively to Christ’s call. We acknowledge an emotional motive to believe such a doctrine. It makes us feel better both about the lost and about God’s fairness. However, such a belief is a departure from the very clear teaching of the New Testament and is a serious error in one’s soteriology. It devalues the importance of this life as a time to choose whether or not one will serve the Lord and lessens the seriousness of not choosing correctly (see Matthew 7:13-14).

As Robinson correctly observes, “A major difference between Evangelical and LDS views on the afterlife is that the LDS believe the period between death and resurrection is still a probationary or testing period for those in hell” (p. 150). In support he references three biblical passages: John 5:25-29; 1 Peter 3:18-20; and 1 Peter 4:6. We will argue three points in this regard: (1) The first of these texts cannot be plausibly interpreted to support this doctrine; (2) the second and third could be taken as a reference to Jesus’ preaching the gospel to the dead (possibly to evangelize them; the text does not say this), but this is an unlikely interpretation; and (3) this is incompatible with the story of Lazarus and the rich man (see Luke 16:19-31), which Robinson interprets as a literal description of the intermediary state (see p. 150).

Why Robinson understands John 5:25-29 as a reference to a probationary period between death and the resurrection is not clear. Presumably he takes Jesus’ statement that “The hour is

177 Leith, Creeds of the Churches, 39.
coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live” (John 5:25) to refer to Jesus preaching to the dead while he was in the grave. Likewise with the statement in John 5:28, “for the hour is coming, in which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice.” In John 5:24 Jesus said that “He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life.” As best as we can tell Robinson interprets this passage to mean that those in the grave who hear Jesus’ voice and believe shall be “passed from death unto life.”

But much militates against such an understanding of this text.

Readers should recognize that in this discourse Jesus is using the term the dead with a double meaning. He is using it to refer to both the spiritually dead and the physically dead. Everyone on earth is spiritually dead except those who hear Jesus’ word and believe in the Father who sent him; they have “eternal life and will not be condemned” (John 5:24 NIV). Because they have responded positively to Jesus’ word, such have “crossed over from death to life” (John 5:24). Notice the tense of the verbs: the believer currently has eternal life (εἰζεί, present tense); he has crossed over from death into life (μεταβηθηκεν, perfect tense indicating a past completed action). When Jesus says that “the hour is coming and has now come” he is referring to the resurrection of the dead. The time is ahead when Jesus will speak and the dead will hear him and live (see John 5:25). Hearing him, they will come out of their graves, some to continue living, others to be condemned (see John 5:29). But the radical point in Jesus’ statement is that that time of resurrection is not just future, it “now is” (John 5:25). Jesus’ authority to judge the dead and to grant either life or condemnation does not wait for a future hour (see John 5:26-27, 30); he can grant eternal life even now! As Beasley-Murray writes, “The ‘hour’ that is coming is that of the eschatological future, to which the resurrection of the dead belongs; but it has already entered the present, since the Christ

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178 John 5:28 should make this abundantly obvious. But if not, the apostle Paul apparently knew this teaching of Jesus and understood it as a reference to the resurrection of the dead. See 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17, where Paul teaches “according to the Lord’s own word” that Jesus will come down from heaven “with a loud command” and the dead will be resurrected.
who raises the dead is here.” Jesus has just described an eschatological miracle and for that reason his Jewish listeners were amazed (see John 5:28). In sum, this passage is the strongest affirmation of realized eschatology applied to the believer in the New Testament and says nothing of a postmortem opportunity to respond to the gospel.

The passages cited from 1 Peter, if taken in isolation from the rest of the New Testament, could, in part, be interpreted to support Robinson’s position. They do not, however, say as much as Robinson would need them to say if they are to be a straightforward proof-text for his doctrine. It should be mentioned that some of the church fathers did understand these texts to mean that between his death and resurrection, Jesus went by the Spirit to preach the gospel to the spirits of dead people who had lived in the days of Noah (or at least before Christ). But, as George Ladd notes, “This view soon lost favor, for it opened the door to the possibility of salvation after death.” They knew this was not a proper interpretation because the rest of the New Testament presents a view of life that emphasizes the importance of choosing Christ now as the only chance. Besides the various passages that connect death and the consequences of judgment in close sequence (see, e.g., Hebrews 9:27), it should be recognized that the Bible never represents the final judgment as based on anything done after we die but emphasizes that it will be based on the works done in this life (see Matthew 25:31–46; Romans 2:5–10; 2 Corinthians 5:10; Hebrews 10:26–39).

Blomberg points out that an interpretation of 1 Peter 3:19–20 such as Robinson’s presupposes two things: (1) that the spirits whom Christ preached to were those of dead humans and (2) that the preaching was an offer of salvation (see p. 172). But as Blomberg mentions, “The word for ‘spirits,’ pneumata, in every other unqualified use in the Bible, in the plural, refers to angelic or demonic—not human—spirits. Thus it is more likely that this passage describes Christ’s announcement of victory over the demonic world . . . than any postmortem offer of repentance to the unevangelized” (p. 172). This interpretation is made more likely

179 Beasley-Murray, John, 76.
because the word Peter uses here for "preach" is κηρύσσω, a neutral word for announcing a message or making a proclamation. Blomberg acknowledges that in 1 Peter 4:6 the situation is different (see p. 173). In this verse Peter is talking about dead humans, and he uses the word εὐαγγέλιον, which refers to the offer of salvation. But as Blomberg adds, "The immediate context (vv. 4–5) makes the point that people will be judged for the things they do while they are alive, even if they die before the judgment day. So verse 6 most likely implies that believers, too, are judged on the basis of the response they made to the gospel while they were alive" (p. 173).

Though we feel that many very good and compelling reasons exist to reject the notion of postmortem salvation, despite its emotive attractiveness, here we will mention but one. Robinson cites Luke 16:19–31 as a proof-text for the Latter-day Saint doctrine of the afterlife. Evangelicals are divided among themselves as to whether or not this passage should be taken as a literal account of the intermediate state or if Jesus only told the story as a parable. It can be taken either way. Whether or not it is a literal description or not is irrelevant to our discussion here. What is relevant is that both the moral point it makes and its description (if taken literally) are decidedly against any sort of postmortem opportunity to respond to the gospel.

In this story the beggar Lazarus dies and is taken to Abraham's bosom, where he is with the patriarch himself. The rich

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182 But not the dead as a whole as in Latter-day Saint eschatology. Most commentators agree that Peter is referencing only a portion of them relevant to his immediate argument, namely those Christians that had died after receiving the gospel on earth. See the discussions in the commentaries listed below.

man (traditionally named Dives), in front of whose house Lazarus had begged, likewise died but was taken to Hades (or hell). Whereas Lazarus was in a paradise, Dives was being tormented. Dives sees Abraham and Lazarus far away and calls out to Abraham for help. He asks Abraham to have pity on him and send Lazarus with a few drops of water on the tip of his finger in order to cool his tongue. Abraham answers and tells Dives that he had received good things while he was alive and now he was receiving justly deserved agony. But Abraham gives a further reason for not sending Lazarus: "And besides all this, between us and you there is a great chasm fixed, in order that those who wish to come over from here to you may not be able, and that none may cross over from there to us" (Luke 16:26 NASB).

This verse makes the perspicuous point that once one dies he cannot change the fate he determined for himself in this life. First, it would simply be unfair; the principle of reaping what you sow would be broken (roughly the point of Luke 16:25). Second, Abraham recognizes a great chasm between the abode of the righteous and the unrighteous. This chasm is of such a nature that it cannot be crossed. It cannot be crossed by the righteous who might wish to alleviate the suffering of the unrighteous, nor can it be crossed by the wicked who wish to leave their torments and be with Abraham. There simply is no bridge over the chasm. As Darrell Bock writes, "The image is strong and suggests that how we respond in this life is decisive for where we reside in the next, a key point that some find hard to accept. If righteous and unrighteous do not mix in the afterlife, then the possibility of being saved after death is excluded."

That this present life is the only opportunity to determine our eternal destiny is clarified by the rich man's second approach. Holding out no hope for himself (his fate is sealed), he requests that Lazarus be raised from the dead in order to warn his brothers to repent (see Luke 16:27–28). He is sure that if a dead man comes back to life to warn them they will repent (see Luke 16:30). But Abraham argues that if men will not repent on the basis of the scriptures ("Moses and the Prophets"), "neither will they

be persuaded if someone rises from the dead” (Luke 16:31). The point seems to be clear. This life is the one opportunity to repent of sins. A second chance is not given after this life. And in this life God has given men his Word. His Word is enough to call men to repentance. If its call is not heeded, not even the most astounding of things (like a man raised from the dead) will be able to convince the sinner to repent. Whether or not this story is a literal description, “A major point is that once one dies, one’s fate is sealed. This account allows no room for those in Hades to eventually win their way into heaven.”

185 Ibid., 1361. The importance of this life in determining one’s eternal fate is also emphasized in the Book of Mormon in such a way that it is difficult to allow for even the possibility of postmortem salvation there. The long speeches of Jacob to the Nephites (2 Nephi 9), Alma to Zeezrom (Alma 12), Amulek to the Zoramites (Alma 34) and Alma to Corianton (Alma 39–42) repeatedly exhort their listeners to repent of their sins because if they do not they shall be eternally condemned. The entire thrust of these speeches is on repenting and living righteously in this life because this life is the probationary period that absolutely determines one’s eternal fate. That the probationary state mentioned in these texts is this earthly life and not the period between death and resurrection is indisputable. Contrariwise, Robinson claims that “the period between death and resurrection is still a probationary or testing period for those in hell” (p. 150). But in light of a verse like Alma 12:24, it is hard to see how the probationary period could extend beyond death. It reads: “And we see that death comes upon mankind, yea, the death which has been spoken of by Amulek, which is the temporal death; nevertheless there was a space granted unto man in which he might repent; therefore this life became a probationary state; a time to prepare to meet God; a time to prepare for that endless state which has been spoken of by us, which is after the resurrection of the dead.” Notice that there was “a space granted” in which man might repent, not two. And it is “this life” that became a probationary state. Also, this life is “a time to prepare for that endless state.” There simply is no room for Robinson’s theology in this passage. Second Nephi 9 likewise leaves no room for a postmortem chance at salvation. Verses 31–37 are a list of “woes” to sinners. Each follows a pattern in which the first half declares a woe to a certain type of sinful person. The second half lists a severe eschatological punishment. The entire list is summarized in verse 38 with: “And, in fine, wo unto all those who die in their sins; for they shall return to God, and behold his face, and remain in their sins.” However, the clincher passage is Alma 34:32–34: “For behold, this life is the time for men to prepare to meet God; yea, behold the day of this life is the day for men to perform their labors. And now, as I said unto you before, as ye have had so many witnesses, therefore, I beseech of you that ye do not procrastinate the day of your repentance until the end; for after this day of life, which is given us to prepare for eter-
Conclusion

Stephen Robinson and Craig Blomberg have done the adherents of their respective religions a service in writing this book. Both should be commended for their efforts to present their views with clarity, to deal with the issues honestly, and to display a charitable attitude in the process. *How Wide the Divide?* is one of the most important books ever to be written on Mormonism. Anyone with an interest in Mormonism who has not yet read this book dare not wait any longer. *Things have changed*. Latter-day Saints no longer have an excuse for expressing their views with imprecise language, bad terminology, or pejorative anti-Evangelical rhetoric. Evangelicals no longer have an excuse for not trying to understand contemporary Latter-day Saint theology on its own terms, for sloppy scholarship, or for employing pejorative anti-Mormon rhetoric. Craig Blomberg and Stephen Robinson have changed the tone of discussion to a level appropriate for those who call themselves Christians. We can all hope and pray that others will follow the path these two have pioneered.

Throughout this review we have attempted to interact critically with the two authors. We have tried to look at the most important issues of each chapter with the kind of attitude exemplified in *How Wide the Divide?* We have earnestly tried to avoid the nauseating errors of so many Evangelicals writing on Mormonism: wasting time attacking fringe positions, refusing to interact with Latter-day Saint scholarship, being disrespectful to one’s

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nity, behold, if we do not improve our time while in this life, then cometh the night of darkness wherein there can be no labor performed. Ye cannot say, when ye are brought to that awful crisis, that I will repent, that I will return to my God. Nay, ye cannot say this; for that same spirit which doth possess your bodies at the time that ye go out of this life, that same spirit will have power to possess your body in that eternal world." Only the nimblest of exegetical gymnastics could make these Book of Mormon passages allow for the possibility of post-mortem salvation.

186 Joseph Fielding McConkie’s *Sons and Daughters of God* provides a textbook example of the way Latter-day Saints should not examine the issues that distinguish Mormonism from mainstream Christianity.

187 John Ankerberg and John Weldon’s *Behind the Mask of Mormonism: From Its Early Schemes to Its Modern Deceptions* (Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House, 1992) provides a textbook example of the way Evangelicals should not examine the issues which distinguish Mormonism from orthodox Christianity.
opponents. We have attempted to interact with the trained LDS philosophers and scholars, who are often able to present their views with greater precision and clarity than LDS General Authorities.188

Although at times we have critiqued opposing views with vigor, we hope we have done so in a manner that reveals our respect for those with whom we disagree. We cannot help but admire a sharp mind and a powerful pen when we run across one, wherever we find it, even if we cannot agree with the author’s conclusions. Reading men like Orson Pratt, B. H. Roberts, Hugh Nibley, Truman Madsen, David Paulsen, Blake Ostler, and Stephen Robinson (among others) has taught us much. We likewise encourage Latter-day Saints to read widely in mainstream Christian theology. Latter-day Saints could learn a great deal from ancient writers such as Athanasius and Augustine; reformers like John Calvin; those spiritual Redwoods called the Puritans; the great eighteenth- and nineteenth-century evangelists and pastor-theologians Jonathan Edwards, John Wesley, and Charles Haddon Spurgeon; and the brilliant Princetonian divines Charles Hodge, B. B. Warfield, and J. Gresham Machen. From our own day, among others, we heartily recommend to readers of all levels D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, John MacArthur, Wayne Grudem, and faithful biblical scholars like Craig Blomberg.189 Latter-day Saints should not feel intimidated going into Christian bookstores to buy a few good books, and Evangelicals should not hesitate to enter an LDS bookstore for the same reason. The key to better understanding is reading the right books, seeing what our opponents believe, and conversing with one another with an ear to learn.

Just how wide is the divide? That question must ultimately be answered for oneself. As for us, in the spirit of the joint conclusion (see pp. 189–96), we grant that in the larger theological landscape Latter-day Saints and Evangelicals are in substantial agreement on many points of Christian doctrine.190 However, we must

188 This of course is not meant to demean the General Authorities. The LDS Church readily grants that its leaders are not trained theologians.
189 Including many of the books cited in this review.
190 This does not mean that we are necessarily happy with the wording of all twelve joint affirmations or that we don’t think additional issues could have been listed among those that divide us.
maintain that LDS beliefs remain unacceptably outside the boundaries of Christian orthodoxy on many points. Primarily these all revolve around four fundamental aspects of contemporary Latter-day Saint theology: (1) a theologically unacceptable form of finite theism; (2) an implicit denial of monotheism in large part resulting from a rejection of the *homousion* doctrine; (3) an inappropriate ontological subordinationism of the Son to the Father within the Godhead rather than a solely functional one; and (4) a heretical\textsuperscript{191} anthropology that falls into the snare of a synergistic semi-Pelagianism. The positions of contemporary Latter-day Saint thinkers such as Stephen Robinson narrow the divide considerably over their counterparts in generations past. Nonetheless, the divide between Evangelical Christianity and Mormonism still remains very deep indeed. We can only hope that one day it will be gone entirely.

*How Wide the Divide?* is an important first step in eradicating the divide. But it is only that, a first step. Much more needs to be done. If, as both Latter-day Saints and Evangelicals insist, God does exist, and if religion is more than a mere sociological phenomenon, then we really can know religious truths. As it is, Evangelicalism and Mormonism make mutually contradictory truth claims; both cannot be right. Therefore, the task of grappling over the issues, assaying the evidence, asking the hard questions, giving the difficult answers, and changing positions lies ahead. We hope that Evangelicals and Latter-day Saints are peoples of character and virtue who will not allow differences to stand without an honest attempt to determine who, if either, is correct. We hope all will be humble enough to accept criticisms, admit mistakes, and for-sake error. We must. The issues are of the utmost seriousness and the consequences bear eternal significance; we cannot afford to do otherwise.

\textsuperscript{191} We do not use the term “heretical” pejoratively, but with the commonly accepted meaning of “contrary to the conclusions of some standard authority.” Compare the similar technical use of the word in describing Latterday Saint doctrine by Sterling McMurrin in his *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion*, x.
Appendix: Hellenism, Greek Philosophy, and the Creedal "Straightjacket" of Christian Orthodoxy

Throughout *How Wide the Divide?* Stephen Robinson has, without warrant (biblical or otherwise), succumbed to what Marie Isaacs aptly describes as the pejorative sentiment of equating either “Hellenistic” or “metaphysics” with all that is “mad, bad and dangerous to know.” It is our contention that much of Robinson’s case for rejecting orthodox Christianity rests on a fundamental misunderstanding of what “Hellenism” is and is not and of when and how it affected the history of Christianity. In addition to points made in the body and notes of this critical review, we have added this appendix to specifically contest Robinson’s position concerning the influence of Hellenism and Greek philosophy on orthodox Christian theology. Sadly, Robinson does not give his readers a clear summary of his argument. Instead we are treated to a multifarious assortment of assertions about the role of Hellenization and Greek philosophy in the development of traditional Christian theology.193


193 We chose to save the reader from having to read a lot of tedious and repetitive refutations of each of Robinson’s many assertions. Instead we have taken a general approach that should undermine all of them. Representative statements by Robinson include the following: “the church established by Christ in the New Testament was changed by later Christian intellectuals who believed the simple New Testament proclamation to be inadequate. . . . The second-, third- and fourth-century church sought to ‘improve’ the New Testament gospel by the standards of Hellenistic philosophy, but compromised it instead” (p. 17); “Evangelicals make certain philosophical assumptions about the nature of the universe and about what is possible and what is not possible that Latter-day Saints do not share. Much traditional Christian theology has been wedded to Greek philosophical categories and assumptions” (p. 88); “We simply reject the philosophical assumptions adopted by Evangelicals about the nature of reality—about what God can or cannot do or be. The LDS are troubled by the fact that the God of Christian ‘orthodoxy’ is virtually indistinguishable from the God of the Hellenistic philosophers” (p. 92); “the Council of Chalcedon invented a second nature for Christ, something never stated in the Bible, to satisfy the philosophers by keeping the human and the divine separate in Christ as Plato insisted they must be” (p. 83). Elsewhere he speaks simply of the “Hellenization of Christianity.”
While Robinson does not clearly summarize his complaint, recently Latter-day Saint Blake Ostler has given a summary of the LDS position, one which Robinson would presumably consider to be an accurate précis of his own. For our readers’ convenience we quote Ostler’s summary here. He writes,

Mormons have rejected the strangle-hold of Hellenistic philosophy on Christian thought embodied in the various creeds. The LDS Church teaches that traditional Christianity took a wrong turn when it replaced the personal God of biblical revelation with the metaphysical absolutes derived from Greek philosophy. Anyone at all familiar with the history and development of traditional Christian thought is aware that Christian theology has imbibed a good deal of Hellenistic philosophy.\(^{194}\)

**Hellenism and New Testament Christianity.** To begin with, Robinson is not entirely clear what he means by the term *Hellenistic.* Lexically the word simply means “Greek” and nothing more.\(^{195}\) But Robinson obviously uses the term in a much more specific, though never precisely specified, manner. Robinson should have defined his terms rather than making vague and sweeping accusations against the church fathers and the creeds. As the great German scholar Martin Hengel has written:

> Anyone who uses the word “Hellenistic” should define it more precisely. It has too many aspects. Does it simply mean “Greek in the late period” or “oriental syncretistic”? Does it refer to technology, art, economics, politics, rhetoric and literature, philosophy or religion? Might it even simply mean “pagan,” as it did later, from the third century on? It is this multiplicity which makes our theme so difficult, especially as a great variety of nuances has come together. Or does it relate to ancient Greek myth, to Iranian, Egyptian, Babylonian or even Gnostic mythology? (This last usage is particularly popular and misleading.) *Unquali-

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195  The Greeks referred to themselves as the *Hellenes* (οἱ Ἑλληνοὶ).
fied use of the term Hellenistic no longer produces clarity; it simply increases the historical confusion.\textsuperscript{196}

Of course, according to the most basic meaning of the term, Christianity was born in a completely Hellenistic environment—it was “Hellenistic” from the start. For example, by the first century most residents of Palestine, including native populations, had some knowledge of the Greek language (even if only for trading purposes). Many knew the language quite well. The evidence from the canonical gospels, coupled with data from archaeological finds, makes it certain that Jesus himself taught in Greek on at least a few occasions and probably on many others as well.\textsuperscript{197} Several of the Twelve had Greek names (Philip, Andrew, Peter) and presumably all spoke the language. There was also a considerable minority in the early Jerusalem church who spoke nothing but Greek (see Acts 6:1–7). And, finally, all the New Testament documents were originally composed in the Greek language (with the possible exception of Matthew).\textsuperscript{198} Assuredly mere linguistic Hellenism is not what Robinson finds so undesirable. It is the influence of Greek ideas on second- and third-century Christianity that he finds suspect.

Robinson seems to assume that earliest Christianity was free from Hellenistic influences but that following the first generation or two the church was infiltrated by Greek ideas that resulted in the gospel’s corruption. But the Hellenistic environment of even


\textsuperscript{197} Jesus on several occasions traveled into regions where Greek was the spoken language. The gospels record that he traveled to the region of Tyre and Sidon where he spoke with the Syrophoenician woman (see Mark 7:24/Matthew 15:22), to the Decapolis where he healed many and fed the four thousand (see Mark 7:31–8:9/Matthew 15:29–38). It is also recorded that early in his ministry “news about him spread all over Syria” and that “large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him” (Matthew 4:24–25, emphasis added). During the last week before the Passion a group of Greeks among a crowd of worshipers in Jerusalem requested to see Jesus (see John 12:20). Jesus’ reply and the attending voice from heaven were heard and understood by that crowd. Each of these facts requires that Jesus spoke Greek on at least these occasions. We have good reason to believe that his utilization of the Greek language went beyond these few certainly known instances.

\textsuperscript{198} See Eusebius, Historia Ecclesiastica 3.39.14–16.
the earliest Christianity was not limited to linguistics. In the three centuries before Christ the Jewish people had been *extensively* Hellenized. That is, more than simply adopting the language, the Jews were influenced by *ideas* and customs with Greek origins.\(^ {199} \)

Though at times fiercely resistant to compulsory radical Hellenization by Seleucid and Ptolemaic overlords (see 1 and 2 Maccabees), all Jews, even the most conservative of rabbis, were eventually affected to some degree.\(^ {200} \) Likely Robinson would respond to this from his LDS theological understanding of history and reply that first-century Judaism was apostate and had lost the fullness of the gospel that Jesus came to “restore.” However, this *is* the Judaism from which Christianity was born. Even Palestinian Judaism was a form of *Hellenized* Judaism, which means that early Christianity was as well.\(^ {201} \)

Now, if part of Jesus’ mission was to bring a restoration of the gospel as Latter-day Saints contend, then we would expect him to remove undesirable elements from Judaism (like Hellenism) in addition to restoring things which were lost. As Evangelicals we have no problem affirming that many segments of first-century Judaism were corrupt and had wandered from the purity of God’s truth. We readily affirm that a significant part of Jesus’ earthly ministry was devoted to correcting such deviations. The most prominent example is probably the Sermon on the Mount (esp. Matthew 5:17–48), wherein Jesus rejected many man-made rules and traditions that had been built around the law of Moses like a hedge. Interestingly, though, what we do not see is Jesus rejecting the influences that Hellenism *per se* had on Jewish religion. He

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\(^ {199} \) For an immense compilation of the evidence for this, see Martin Hengel’s magisterial work, *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in Their Encounter in Palestine during the Early Hellenistic Period* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974).

\(^ {200} \) In fact, it really was not until after the Jewish defeat of A.D. 70 that the more formal rabbinate arose as a countermovement to the explicit Hellenization of Judaism. But even rabbinical Judaism was influenced and affected by Greek language and thought.

\(^ {201} \) Compare Hengel, “Since after a more than three-hundred-year history under the influence of Greek culture Palestinian Judaism can also be described as ‘Hellenistic Judaism,’ the term ‘Hellenistic’ as currently used no longer serves to make any meaningful differentiation in terms of the history of religions within the history of earliest Christianity.” The ‘Hellenization’ of Judaea, 53, emphasis in original.
rejected those groups like the Sadducees who were **radically** Hellenized to the point that they denied the resurrection of the dead, the existence of angels, and so forth, but Jesus never displays the attitude that all things Greek are “mad, bad, and dangerous to know.” This is significant.

The example of Paul the apostle is pertinent regarding earliest Christian attitudes toward Hellenistic philosophy, especially concerning their beliefs about God. Not only did Paul not purge early Christianity of the Hellenistic elements inherited from Judaism, he did something his rabbinical counterparts were unlikely to do; he explicitly quoted from Greek writers. Paul was more than willing to use some aspects of Greek philosophy as a tool to help him convince intellectual Greeks of the truth of the Christian faith—an example later followed by Christian apologists like Justin Martyr.

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202 Latter-day Saint scholar C. Wilfred Griggs summarizes a good bit of the evidence for the Hellenization of Palestinian Judaism and arrives at conclusions similar to what we have argued for in the above portion of this appendix. Though he does not discuss the specific point of Paul's attitude toward Greek philosophy *per se*, he does briefly discuss how Hellenism might have affected Paul's education and thought. He correctly states that: “The New Testament and early Christian landscapes appear quite different now from how they appeared half a century ago, and the dynamic forces of intercultural contacts were greater than we previously understood.” The reason for this is the simple fact that the vast number of new discoveries in recent years has forced scholars to reexamine old assumptions and interpretations. A weakness of many of the writings of Hugh Nibley is that he based many of his arguments on assumptions about the relationship between early Christianity and the Hellenistic world that are now demonstrably misguided. It appears to us that Robinson's overly negative attitude toward all things Greek may be rooted in some of these same assumptions. Griggs offers sound advice when he writes, “The main point is that our understanding of the past is changing rapidly, and, therefore, we should distinguish between what is spiritually enduring and unchanging and what is subject to modification with new discoveries.” We suggest that Latter-day Saint scholars like Robinson—and we do not say this disrespectfully—allow their understanding of ancient Christian history to be modified by the evidence rather than holding on to poorly supported presuppositions simply because they give one's theology a measure of support. We offer the same advice to those Evangelicals who tend to oversimplify the complexities of Christian history. The quotations from Griggs are out of ""An Hebrew of the Hebrews": Paul's Language and Thought," in *The Apostle Paul: His Life and His Testimony*, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994), 62.
When in Athens Paul discussed the gospel with some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers and accompanied them to the very heart of Greek philosophy, the Areopagus, to discuss matters further (see Acts 17:16–34). In this environment Paul quoted the Greek writers Aratus and Cleanthes in making his case (see Acts 17:28). It is significant that these statements of Aratus and Cleanthes originally referred to the supreme Greek god Zeus. Paul found that what these Greeks had written about their supreme god on the points he was making was compatible with the biblical concept of God (which is not to say that he identified Zeus with the God of the Bible). It appears that Paul did not view all things Hellenistic as the enemy of the gospel, not even philosophy itself. Quite the opposite, he found some aspects of it actually helpful in presenting the gospel to Gentiles.

Paul was not a syncretist (i.e., fusing Christian and Greek religious ideas), nor was he a religious pluralist (i.e., all religions are “true”). One might then wonder how he could have felt comfortable quoting pagan philosophers and poets favorably. But Paul had a perfectly sound theological rationale for this, the same rationale later employed by the church fathers in their appropriation of certain Greek concepts to express their biblically founded beliefs. Paul proclaims this theological basis in the midst of his argument for the rightness of God’s wrath being revealed against the wicked in Romans 1. He says that “what may be known about God is plain to them [the wicked], . . . For since the creation of the

203 Later, Paul quoted Epimenides in his letter to Titus (see Titus 1:12) and a proverb from Menander’s Thais in 1 Corinthians 13:3.

204 True, in Colossians 2:8 Paul warned his readers to “beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men.” But this is hardly a rejection of all philosophy, which would be inconsistent with Paul’s own practice. He simply realizes that philosophy can be and is used to attack the gospel. Apparently some at Colossae were using it in this way. Throughout church history it has been philosophers who are the strongest opponents of Christianity. But this does not mean that philosophy per se is evil. There is such a thing as good philosophy. As C. S. Lewis once wrote “Good philosophy must exist, if for no other reason, because bad philosophy needs to be answered.” See The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1965), 50. Perhaps Robinson’s unduly negative attitude towards philosophy stems from the failure to make Lewis’s simple distinction between good philosophy and bad philosophy.
world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse” (Romans 1:19–20). He goes on to speak of the gentiles who “do not have the law” (i.e., Torah) who “do by nature things required by the law” because “they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness” (Romans 2:14–15).

These passages clearly show that something can be known about God’s character and moral laws from the created world apart from special revelation. Theologians call this means of theological truth general revelation. General revelation is God’s revelation of himself in nature and consciousness generally available to all people. The Greeks from whom Paul quoted had attended to this revelation of God in nature sufficiently to have derived some true beliefs about God. The early Christians followed Paul’s example and found other instances in which the Greeks had observed nature closely enough to correctly understand something about God and his moral law. (We will come back to this topic shortly.) Since these were truths about God it did not matter who discovered them first. If they were true they were true; they were legitimate ideas for the church to appropriate.

Hellenistic philosophy, Mormonism, and the apostasy. As with the general term Hellenistic, Robinson is similarly unspecific in what he means by Hellenistic or Greek philosophy. It is not that we do not know what Greek philosophy is, but Robinson never really clarifies what aspects of Greek philosophy were so dangerous to the gospel. Surely he does not mean Greek philosophy in toto! It must be remembered that in the ancient world, Greek philosophy encompassed a wide complex of studies that included the beginnings of the natural and social sciences, geometry, logic, ethics, and political theory.

We hope that Robinson doesn’t believe Euclid’s geometry and Aristotle’s rules of logic were the culprits that hijacked the gospel and sent the church into apostasy. He probably has in mind what the Greeks called “physics” (from φυσικός, “belonging to nature”). Greek physics, a distant relative of both modern physics and natural theology, was the study of the world
itself—how or if it was made, what laws govern its processes, the
existence and nature of a God or gods, and if so, what he/they
is/are like. It appears that Robinson objects to Greek physics and
metaphysics.205

By this point it should be clear that Robinson has been unduly
negative about Hellenism in general and philosophy specifically.
But did the postapostolic church go beyond St. Paul’s example
and allow a particular form of Greek philosophy or metaphysics
to seduce the church away from the truth? Robinson says “yes”
and places the greatest share of the blame on Platonism. Which
form of Platonism he never really specifies. Whether or not classic
Platonism, Middle Platonism, or Neoplatonism is intended we
don’t know. Again, he has failed to make important distinctions
and thereby his accusations lack any real force. If Robinson is
referring to all forms of Greek philosophy or even all forms of
Platonism, then he is in a curious position. For the very places in
which LDS scholars find parallels with Mormonism among certain
segments of ancient Christianity are exactly where some variety of
Platonism or some other philosophical school has had the most
influence. For example, LDS scholars have pointed out many par-
allels with Clement and Origen of Alexandria—perhaps the two
most Platonic of the church fathers. They have also pointed out
parallels in the Gnostic Nag Hammadi texts. Gnosticism could
aptly be described as Platonism on steroids; it invariably takes
Platonic beliefs to the extreme.206

205 Metaphysics is the study of the first principles of the world, so named
because it came “after” (μετά) the section on physics in Aristotle’s works. In
light of the above discussion of God’s revelation in nature there shouldn’t be any
objection to the metaphysical enterprise of the Greeks per se, at least if one
shares Paul’s conviction that God has indeed left a witness of himself in nature
that can be detected and explored.

206 James W. Thompson writes, “Gnosticism is discussed today by classi-
cal scholars as a category within the Platonic tradition. Because Platonism itself
was no unified movement, it is impossible to distinguish its world view from
Gnostic views.” He refers his readers to John M. Dillon’s The Middle Platonists,
80 B.C. to A.D. 220 (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996) and H.
Krämer’s Der Ursprung der Geistmetaphysik as examples of this. Thompson, The
Beginnings of Christian Philosophy: The Epistle to the Hebrews (Washington
Further, what is perhaps the strongest parallel between Latter­day Saint theology and the theology of some early Christians is the doctrine of theosis or divinization. Yet it is this doctrine of the early church that has been described as the prime example of the "acute Hellenization of Christianity." According to von Harnack, the doctrine of divinization in the early church resulted from "men's increasing indifference to daily life and growing aspiration after a higher one, a longing that was moreover nourished among the more cultured by the philosophy which was steadily gaining ground." Harnack goes so far as to say that the doctrine of theosis, not being a part of the gospel, only served to obscure it. He writes:

But, when the Christian religion was represented as the belief in the incarnation of God and as the sure hope of the deification of man, a speculation that had originally never got beyond the fringe of religious knowledge was made the central point of the system and the simple content of the Gospel was obscured.

Perhaps von Harnack is wrong, perhaps not. But it is telling that he saw theosis as an obfuscation of the gospel and the prime example of the acute Hellenization of Christianity. It is also telling that von Harnack detected that the driving force behind this doctrine was philosophy, the very thing Robinson believes hijacked the true church. If Robinson wants to see an example of Greek philosophy hijacking the gospel, Platonism specifically, then Nicene and Chalcedonian orthodoxy really is not the place to look; he would do much better to look to Gnosticism.

Parallels between Mormonism and postapostolic Christianity (e.g., divinization) are often purported to be the remnants of an earlier form of Christianity that predated the apostasy. Now it may be that Robinson doesn’t follow his LDS colleagues in finding

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209 Ibid., 2:318.
significance in these reputed similarities.\textsuperscript{210} But if they are not significant, then one has little basis for believing that there ever was an earlier “pure” Christianity possessing the “fulness of the gospel.” Unless unambiguous contradictions concerning essential matters of the faith are demonstrated between the New Testament and the orthodox tradition, all someone like Robinson can do is assert that the flavor of New Testament Christianity is different from that of the postapostolic church.

This difference in flavor demonstrates nothing more than the fact that the majority of Christians were now gentiles rather than Jews. If Jesus was serious about his gospel being taken to all nations (see Matthew 28:19, €€\textit{ev euyn}—lit. “foreign ethnic groups”), then this phenomenon should be expected since gentiles outnumber the Jews. Jesus told his disciples to deliver to all peoples a message of good news about God’s kingdom and salvation—not Jewish culture, customs, and modes of expression. Just as ice cream can be found in different flavors without changing its nature, the gospel can be found in a variety of cultural “flavors” without its essential nature being changed. All Robinson’s assertion shows is that Christianity in the first century had a heavy Jewish “flavor,” in the second and third centuries a Hellenistic one. This is no evidence for an apostasy. The burden of proof is on Stephen Robinson to demonstrate that the essential nature of the church’s message was replaced when the majority of the church shifted from Jewish to gentile believers, something we don’t believe is possible to do.

\textit{Philosophy and the church fathers.} Robinson’s position gives the impression that the Christianity of the second century onward had a close relationship with Greek philosophy. However, this fails to take into account the attitude of Greek philosophers towards Christianity, especially Platonists. It is a point of fact that the Platonic philosophers were early Christianity’s stiffest competition.

\textsuperscript{210} It seems to us that Robinson is being consistent. If the Latter-day Saint wishes to attribute the apostasy to Hellenization, then most of the parallels between Mormonism and early Christianity should not be cited since they show far more Hellenic influence than anything in orthodoxy. Conversely, if the Latter-day Saint wishes to cite the parallels as evidence of a preapostasy form of Christianity that Joseph Smith restored, then he should not cite the Hellenization of Christianity as the culprit that corrupted the true faith.
Men like the Platonist Celsus and the Neoplatonist Porphyry (among others) devoted lengthy and sophisticated books to the refutation of Christianity.⁹²¹ Platonism was anything but friendly to the gospel of Jesus Christ as orthodox Christianity presented it.

Robinson also fails to take into account the church fathers’ own attitude toward philosophy in general. Some, like Tertullian, found no use for it and thought it was entirely bad. He is famous for saying: “What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church? what between heretics and Christians? . . . Away with all attempts to produce a mottled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic composition! We want no curious disputation after possessing Christ Jesus, no inquisition after enjoying the gospel!” Tertullian was anathema on Greek philosophy and yet it is from Tertullian that orthodox Christianity received the technical vocabulary used to express full-blown Trinitarianism. It was Tertullian who coined the term trinitas! That an anti-philosopher like Tertullian was instrumental in formulating the doctrine of the Trinity is evidence directly against Robinson’s claim that the Trinity is the product of Greek philosophy.⁹²²

Others also saw the dangers of syncretizing the gospel with Greek philosophy, but they were not entirely negative about philosophy. Many took the approach of Justin Martyr and used aspects of philosophy against Greek philosophy itself. Before his conversion to Christianity, Justin was a philosopher by trade. He says that in his pre-Christian state he “found satisfaction in Plato’s teaching.” When he saw that the accusations of cannibalism, licentiousness, and so forth, that philosophers brought against the Christians were simply not true, he became dissatisfied with

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²¹¹ All copies of Porphyry’s attack on Christianity were destroyed by order of the Emperor Theodosius II in AD 435. Large portions of Celsus’s work have been preserved in Origen’s rebuttal. R. Joseph Hoffmann has reconstructed and translated it in Celsus, On the True Doctrine: A Discourse against the Christians (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

²¹² Although he was very negative towards philosophy, scholars have observed that Tertullian was influenced by Stoicism in his view of the materiality of spiritual substances. Interestingly, this is where LDS teaching parallels Tertullian most closely. Compare Doctrine and Covenants 131:7, “There is no such thing as inmaterial matter. All spirit is matter, but it is more fine or pure, and can only be discerned by purer eyes.”
Plato and eventually became a Christian.\textsuperscript{213} Once a Christian he devoted much of his life to defending the apostolic faith against the Greek philosophers who incessantly attacked it. His works *The Greeks Answered*, *A Refutation*, and *The Soul* were specifically devoted to this task. At times he would use only scripture. Eusebius tells us that at other times he would also quote the opinions of the Greek philosophers and answer them point by point.\textsuperscript{214}

Justin believed that in God’s providence he had allowed the Greeks to develop their philosophical systems as a preparation for the gospel. Then, when the gospel arrived, it was intended to supersede Greek philosophy in the same manner that the gospel superseded the law of Moses. He saw God’s providential hand working in some of the conclusions of certain Greek philosophers because they were more similar to what Judaism and Christianity taught than to the popular polytheistic Greek and Roman religions. This included such things as the belief in only one God, his omnipotence, and his omnipresence. However, Justin, as with most of the early Christians who found some value in philosophy, did not equate the views of the philosophers with those of the Christians. But there were some similarities, and he used this common ground as a bridge to help him reach philosophical types with the truth of the gospel. (God wants even Greek philosophers to be saved.) Justin was simply following Paul’s example in Athens. Rather than Christianity being taken over by philosophy, men like Justin were hijacking philosophy for biblical Christianity!

*Philosophy and the development of theology.* We maintain that the use of Greek philosophy by the church fathers was both far less extensive than Robinson intimates and of quite a different nature than he supposes. Greek philosophy simply did not have the kind of effect on the formation of Christian orthodoxy that Stephen Robinson claims. Of course, Robinson is not alone in ascribing to philosophy the primary role in the creation of orthodox Christian theology. But as with others, he is wrong. Gerald Bray addresses the issue of philosophy and the origin of Christian theology and makes some astute observations. He notes that theology and philosophy have often been associated together because they

\textsuperscript{213} As recorded in Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 4.8.5.

\textsuperscript{214} Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 4.18.
address some of the same fundamental questions. This happens because of a lack of agreement as how to classify theology within the broader sciences. This type of association is not unlike the relationship between cosmology and physics. But some have wanted to posit a different kind of connection—not a similarity relation stemming from areas of common interest, but the subgroup relation. This type of assertion says that Christian theology is nothing more than an offspring of speculative philosophy. Bray writes:

Many historians would argue that without the stimulus of the Graeco-Roman philosophical schools, Christian theology would never have come into being. There may be an element of truth in this belief, but two important qualifications need to be borne in mind. First, it cannot be claimed that the influence of Greek philosophy drove Christians to develop a corresponding theology; Jews and Muslims were exposed to the same influences, but with very different results. This suggests that there is something in the nature of Christianity itself which led to this development, quite apart from external influences. Second, the Christian theological tradition has always included a strong mystical element which is the declared enemy of Greek philosophy, but which has usually been regarded by theologians as lying close to the heart of their own discipline. The link between theology and philosophy cannot be regarded as inevitable, even though theologians have always borrowed philosophical terms and concepts with great freedom, and have even regarded philosophy as the handmaid of theology.²¹⁵

Notice Bray’s observation that Judaism and Islam were also exposed to the very same philosophical influences but did not develop a discipline of systematic theology or creedal orthodoxy. Why did Christianity go this route but not Judaism and Islam? Because something in the very nature of Christianity, something not derived from Greek philosophy, caused Christian thinkers to systematize their faith. Also notice Bray’s second observation that the

Christian theological tradition has always had a mystical element in it that is the declared enemy of Greek philosophy.

Addressing the same claim, that Christian theology is nothing more than the product of Greek philosophy, Cambridge scholar Christopher Stead writes:

It may be claimed that the main structure of Christian orthodoxy was argued out in a continuous tradition with the aid of philosophical techniques, and that this work can properly be included in the philosophy of religion. This claim might be made for the basic doctrine of God, for those of the Trinity and the Incarnation, perhaps for that of the Creation. . . .

I myself would resist this extension for several reasons. The most obvious is that it conflicts with accepted usage. Any competent librarian knows where to place books on Christian doctrine. . . .

Much more important, the proposal just made ignores the dimension of faith in Christian thinking. It is faith that gives the Christian imagination the power of advancing new perspectives within a continuous tradition of common devotion. This does not mean that it is impossible to present Christian orthodoxy within a rationally ordered scheme. . . . But in the early Church it is clear that the main items of Christian belief were seldom, if ever, argued out in this way; they are the product of Christian reflection upon the Scriptures, accepted by faith as the word of God, in the context of a common life of devotion to Christ, accepted by faith as Lord, Illuminator and Redeemer.216

Here notice how Stead says it was faith that gave the Christian imagination the “power of advancing new perspectives within a continuous tradition of common devotion.” Also notice his claim that the main items of traditional Christian belief—the doctrines of God, the Trinity, the Incarnation, and creation (ex nihilo)—are the

product of Christian reflection on the scriptures, not the product of Greek philosophy.

The fact of the matter is that orthodox Christian theology is fundamentally opposed to Greek philosophy on a number of fronts. Whereas Christians hold to a creation of the universe by divine fiat out of nothing, the Greeks almost universally held that the world was formed out of preexisting matter—a concept not unlike the doctrine of creation *ex materia* in Mormonism. In Greek philosophy God was a static impersonal being removed from the world and unconcerned with it; orthodox Christianity presents him as the living God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who came to earth in the person of the Son for the purpose of redeeming his wayward creatures. Robinson says that “the God of Christian ‘orthodoxy’ is virtually indistinguishable from the God of the Hellenistic philosophers” (p. 92). This statement is simply false. Anyone can compare the two and see that while there may be some resemblance on a limited number of points, many profound differences strongly militate against identifying them as Robinson does.

As we have already mentioned, it was the Greek philosophers, the Platonists especially, who were orthodox Christianity’s most persistent enemies. This alone is strong evidence against Robinson’s more specific claim that *Platonism* was the version of Greek philosophy that sent the church into apostasy. No doubt Christians found many Platonic and Neoplatonic ideas useful as intellectual tools. But the use of such tools was *not* the acceptance of philosophical systems. Not even the greatest of the so-called “Christian Platonists,” Augustine of Hippo (whom some Latter-day Saint thinkers want to castigate as the one who completed the Platonizing of the church), accepted the entire Platonic system of philosophy.217

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218 It must be remembered that Platonism was very often as much a religion as it was a method of doing philosophy. These two senses of Platonism need to be distinguished. It would be nonsensical to claim that Augustine had accepted the entire Platonic or Neoplatonic system with its religious overtones along with his Christianity; on many points Augustine’s Christianity is very much opposed to this sort of Platonism.
Augustine admits that some Platonic ideas assisted him in the process by which he became a Christian. But what was the nature of this assistance? It was not that Augustine found the beliefs of the Christians so naïve that he could not accept the faith until he could first build Platonism into the structure of Christianity.219 Diogenes Allen explains that in the ancient world most conceptions of reality were thoroughly materialistic. Platonism and Christianity were rare exceptions to the rule. On this point the two had something in common. But Augustine, before his conversion, could not conceive of the world except in materialist terms. For him the idea of a spiritual realm that could not be detected by the senses was an implausible suggestion. For Augustine, the Platonists “enabled him to overcome in his journey to Christianity the hindrance caused by his own inability to conceive any reality that was not sensible.”220 This is a far cry from allowing Plato’s thought to dictate what he could and could not believe.221 Augustine and other Christians had found themselves aligned with Platonists and Neoplatonists on a number of issues (just as Evangelicals and Latter-day Saints find each other to be) and the arguments advanced by one group for these issues could equally be used by the other (usually). This is no compromise of the gospel.222

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219 Contra Nibley, World and the Prophets, 82.
221 Augustine readily admitted that the Platonists’ views, out of all the philosophies, came closest to the truth revealed by God (see Confessions 8.2 and citations below). But Augustine was also quite willing to dispute Platonic views that were at odds with the Christian faith (see, e.g., in City of God 9.1–23). Augustine has a lengthy discussion on the Neoplatonic belief that demons were necessary intermediaries between the unapproachable God and men. It was also Augustine’s view that since the Platonists came closest to the truth, it was with the Platonists that Christians ought primarily to dispute rather than wasting time on other less plausible systems of belief (see City of God 8.4–13). Augustine simply was not the syncretist some make him out to be.
222 A good analogy can be made with modern debates about abortion. Evangelicals and Latter-day Saints are definitely on the same side of this issue. Latter-day Saints often use the arguments against abortion forged by Evangelicals without feeling that they are compromising their LDS beliefs. Books on abortion written by members of either religion can be fairly used by members of the other. For example, Evangelical philosopher Francis J. Beckwith’s books on the topic have been used as textbooks at Brigham Young University.
Speaking of the influence of the Neoplatonist Plotinus’s thought on Augustine and Christianity, Stead writes:

But in practice Christian thought was little influenced by the distinctive features of [Plotinus’s] system; what he communicated to Augustine was mainly a vivid impression of the traits common to all Platonists; the reality of the transcendent world, the source both of truth and of beauty, and the high valuation of the intellect as the gateway to it. On the whole Christians paid more attention to his successor and biographer Porphyry; and that not so much for his own philosophical views as for his polemical writings against the Christians.223

If Stead is correct, then we see that even in the case of the greatest of the so-called Christian Platonists Robinson’s accusations do not stand. The role Platonism played in the development of Christian theology was very much the role of a handmaiden to her queen. Greek philosophy could only function in the servant’s role. Christian theology is the queen of the sciences and philosophy is but her assistant. Fundamentally Christian theology is the product of studied contemplation of the biblical texts. As Bray says, “In short, Christian theology began as the exposition of Scripture, and developed its systematic character because of the nature of the God of whom it speaks. The unity of God, his self-consistency and his logical plan of self-disclosure have all determined that Christianity should have a systematic theology, quite apart from any influence which Greek philosophical ideas may have had.”224

*Philosophy and Stephen Robinson.* According to Robinson,

Evangelicals make certain *philosophical* assumptions about the nature of the universe and about what is possible and what is not possible that Latter-day Saints do not share. Much traditional Christian theology has been wedded to Greek philosophical categories and assumptions. Latter-day Saints just do not make the same assumptions. (p. 88)

But the fact that an assumption is philosophical does not make it suspect as Robinson’s scare-italics would imply. Everyone makes assumptions about the nature of the universe and about what is and is not possible—even Latter-day Saints. All such assumptions are philosophical in nature whether or not they are derived from formal philosophy. Further, as we have been contending throughout this section, to say that Christian theology is “wedded” to Greek philosophical categories and assumptions is a vast overstatement and simply not true. We do not deny that Greek philosophical categories had a certain type of influence on the formation of Christian theological systems. But the nature of this influence needs to be spelled out.

We believe that the influence of Greek categories on Christian theology is, in many cases, analogous to the influence of Protestant theological categories on Latter-day Saint theology. A great deal of Latter-day Saint theology is framed in response to Protestant criticisms. A ready example is the issue of the roles of works and grace in salvation. Without doubt this is a distinctively Protestant issue stemming from the controversies of the Reformers with the Roman Catholic Church. But Latter-day Saints grapple with these issues and attendant questions within the predefined playing field determined by Protestant theological categories and terminology. Nonetheless, Latter-day Saints do not necessarily agree with Protestants on these issues even if Protestants first framed them. Similarly, certain LDS doctrines like divine corporeality frame issues of debate between Latter-day Saints and orthodox Christians. Just because the terms of a debate are framed by one group is no reason to think that the use of such categories and assumptions entails an acceptance of their beliefs. This principle holds true for early Christianity and Hellenistic philosophy as well.

A final point. As we have been arguing, the simple fact of using philosophy or a philosophical category does not mean buying into an entire philosophical system of thought. Robinson does not seem to think this possible for the early Christian fathers. Yet he himself is able to make use of philosophical language and categories. For example, in an earlier footnote we cited Robinson’s discussion of the different “ontological frames” within which Evangelicals and Latter-day Saints operate. The word ontological is an
explicitly *philosophical* term. In fact, ontology, that branch of metaphysics devoted to the study of ultimate reality and of what is and is not possible, has its origins in *ancient Greek philosophy*—the very beast that according to Robinson corrupted earliest Christianity. Furthermore, Robinson’s phrase “ontological frame” is very much in line with philosophical use, whether we are speaking of ancient Greek or modern analytical philosophy.\(^{225}\) We do not assume, because Robinson found this a useful category, that he has suddenly become a philosopher of a certain type. Robinson needs to allow the same role to philosophical categories and terms for the early Christians and the development of their theology that he allows for himself.

Overall, it seems that Robinson underestimates the debt that *all* Western thinking, including his own, owes to the ancient Greek philosophers. Robinson fails to realize that we all make philosophical assumptions about the world and we all owe a debt to philosophy. That is a good thing, not a bad one. The fact is that we all employ the skills of reasoning and logic. We all make inferences and deductions. We do many philosophical things even when we are not intending to do philosophy—all of us, including Stephen Robinson. In *How Wide the Divide?* we see this truth over and again. Any argument by Robinson (or Blomberg) that is not directly derived from scripture is philosophical in nature. Any statement *about* scripture that is not explicitly derived from the text of scripture is philosophical in nature. Philosophy itself cannot be avoided, but bad philosophy can. Unless Robinson can show that the early Christians used *bad* philosophy in the formulation of orthodox theology, his assertions have no force.\(^{226}\)


\(^{226}\) Please take careful note: We are not claiming that Christians have never used bad philosophy. We could point to numerous examples to the contrary. But the fact that some thinkers have been too favorable toward certain Greek ideas that are contrary to biblical teachings does not necessitate that all who have found some value in Greek philosophy have adopted antibiblical beliefs.
Conclusion to Appendix

We can summarize the earliest Christian attitude toward Greek philosophy by saying that they thought the Greeks were right on some things, wrong on others. At times they perceived the revelation of God in nature, at times they did not. Where the Greeks were right, that was fair game to use in the proclamation and defense of the Christian faith. The attitude was not at all unlike that of many early Latter-day Saints: all truth is God’s truth wherever it may be found. They would have agreed with Joseph Smith’s belief that “We should gather all the good and true principles in the world and treasure them up.” After all, if something is actually true, then it is perfectly compatible with every other truth no matter where it may have originated. If Robinson wants to reject the limited uses of philosophy by the early Christians, then he must show where this use caused the Christians to accept beliefs which were not true, not that they agreed with ideas of Greek origin.

Evangelicals and Latter-day Saints can continue to argue whether the framers of the ecumenical creeds had a utilitarian use of philosophical terms, distinctions, and categories (as we maintain), or whether they fell prey to a syncretistic adoption of Greek religious philosophy into Christianity (as Robinson maintains). But we hope the sentiment that all things Greek are “mad, bad, and dangerous to know” will be abandoned by Latter-day Saints. As we have briefly argued in this appendix, Christianity was born into a thoroughly Greek world. The Judaism that mothered the new faith was a Hellenistic Judaism. The language the early Christians predominantly spoke was Greek. The New Testament documents were all written in Greek. Rather than characterize every use of Hellenistic thought as a move toward apostasy, it seems better to acknowledge that “when the fulness of time had come, God sent his Son” (Galatians 4:4). Part of that fulness of time was Hellenism. God began the New Covenant in a Greek environment for a purpose; part of that purpose was to use the intellectual achievements of the Greeks (where they were right) for the advancement of the pure gospel of Jesus Christ. That is why the

227 History of the Church, 5:517.
early church fathers often saw these intellectual achievements as a preparation for the gospel, as tools they could use to more effectively present the good news of Israel’s Messiah to a pagan world in the same manner the apostle Paul had done before them.