How Deep the Chasm? A Reply to Owen and Mosser’s Review

David L. Paulsen and R. Dennis Potter


ISSN 1099-9450 (print), 2168-3123 (online)

In exploring the divide between Latter-day Saints and Evangelicals, Paulsen and Potter reply to Owen and Mosser on issues of open canon, continuing revelation, biblical inerrancy, divine finitude, divine embodiment, deification, the Trinity or Godhead, soteriology and anthropology, and postmortem salvation.
How Deep the Chasm?
A Reply to Owen and Mosser’s Review

David L. Paulsen and R. Dennis Potter

In their well-argued and insightful review of How Wide the Divide? Owen and Mosser assert that the book is a positive step toward a Mormon-evangelical dialogue. They continue that dialogue by shedding more light on the nature of the theological divide between Latter-day Saints (hereafter often LDS) and evangelicals by offering fair-minded, yet formidable, criticisms of the LDS view as presented by Robinson.1 We welcome the chance to join this discussion. Our reply to their review will focus on their critique, continuing the dialogue by defending the LDS views that have been challenged. We will also raise some concerns of our own about the corresponding evangelical beliefs. Owen and Mosser’s criticisms of LDS views fall into three broad categories: (1) revelation, (2) the nature of God, and (3) salvation. We will address these in this order.

Revelation
An Open Canon?

The first issue that Owen and Mosser (whose review is cited parenthetically as O&M) discuss is whether the canon is open or closed.2 Mormonism claims that the canon is open, i.e., that there

1 We are quite impressed with Owen and Mosser’s grasp of Latter-day Saint thought and scholarship. It is apparent that they have read a wide range of LDS works (including the standard works), and they give these works a charitable reading. This strengthens their positions, since it helps to avoid the always pervasive straw-man fallacy.

2 Of course, for a Latter-day Saint the possibility of an open canon is not an open issue. Latter-day Saints have records of revelation (i.e., scripture) in addition to the Bible. There actually is continuing revelation that has been canonized. And so, for Latter-day Saints, the question of its possibility is moot. The real issue, from an evangelical perspective, should be whether what Latter-day Saints claim to be scripture really is scripture. Nevertheless, we can engage
is continuing revelation and that some of this revelation has been authoritatively canonized. It is important to note that the issues of whether the canon is open and whether there can be continuing revelation are not necessarily identical, at least from an LDS point of view. Latter-day Saints tend to identify revelation with any communication from God to humanity, and scripture with records of revelation that have been accepted as binding and hence as canon by the common consent of the community of Saints. So, the question about an open canon is a question about official/authoritative scripture and the question about whether there is continuing revelation is a question about communication between God and humanity. Since not every communication between God and humanity is recorded in scripture, one could believe in continuing revelation without believing in an open canon. Of course, for Latter-day Saints it is on the basis of continuing revelation from God that we can expand on the canon. And so the issues are certainly related but not identical.

Now, Owen and Mosser point out that Robinson's primary biblical argument for an open canon is an argument from silence: the Bible does not say that it provides sufficient information for salvation, and so Latter-day Saints have no reason to think that it does. Owen and Mosser respond with their own argument from silence by pointing out that the evangelical can say that the Bible does not say that it does not provide sufficient information for salvation. Of course, if these were the only arguments to consider then we would seem to be in a stalemate—this fact reminds us why an argument from silence is not a good argument. Fortunately, there is more for us to consider.

---


4 We believe that this also points to a difference in the ways in which evangelicals and Latter-day Saints define revelation. For evangelicals the tendency is to identify revelation with scripture (i.e., canon), and so the issue of an open canon becomes identical to the issue of continuing revelation.
For example, we might argue that the question becomes one of burden of proof. And here we think the burden of proof rests clearly on those who advocate a closed canon. The reason for this is simple. In supposing that new revelation is possible we are supposing that God may have something he wants us to know. Indeed, how could we know that we have received all the truths that he wants us to know unless he tells us that we have? Clearly his telling us certain truths does not imply that he has no more truths to tell us. To claim that the canon is open is to claim that God might have something else to say; and that is a much more modest claim than saying that God does not have anything else to say. Without convincing positive evidence for the latter claim, we have every reason to think that God might still have something to say. So, the presumption is in favor of an open canon.

In making this claim, we do not mean that proponents of a closed canon must prove their position as a logician would prove a theorem. Rather, we mean that they have the burden to present positive evidence for their position sufficient to offset the natural presumption against it. Unless and until they do, their position cannot be accepted as credible. If and when they do, Latter-day Saints would be expected to address their arguments.

Joseph Smith turns this question into an argument:

We have what we have, and the Bible contains what it does contain: but to say that God never said anything more to man than is there recorded, would be saying at once that we have at last received a revelation: for it must require one to advance thus far, because it is nowhere said in that volume by the mouth of God that He would not, after giving what is there contained, speak again; and if any man has found out for a fact that the Bible contains all that God ever revealed to man he has ascertained it by an immediate revelation. (Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976], 61)

This argument could be framed as a reductio ad absurdum. Suppose that we can know that there can be no extrabiblical revelation. The only way to know this would be by revelation. But the Bible contains no such revelation. Hence, the only way to know that there is no extrabiblical revelation is by an extrabiblical revelation. But this is self-contradictory. Of course, this is not Owen and Mosser’s position as we understand it. Admitting no convincing biblical basis for their position, they advance rational arguments in support of their claim that the canon is closed. But it does seem passing strange that God would leave a question as important as this one to be resolved only by human reason.
Now Owen and Mosser seem to recognize this burden of proof, since they go on to make positive arguments for the claim that the canon is effectively closed. One reason they advance for holding that the canon is effectively closed (although perhaps not closed in principle) is that any new revelation would be “anticlimactic” (O&M, 13). We are not sure what the theological import of “anticlimactic” would be. If it merely means that the incarnation and atonement of Jesus Christ are the most important events in the history of the world, then we would agree that anything that follows is anticlimactic. But anticlimactic revelation is revelation nevertheless. And its anticlimactic nature might be mitigated by the fact that it all points back to the climax.

On the other hand, if “anticlimactic” is supposed to mean something like “superfluous,” this would hardly seem to be the case from the LDS perspective. Indeed, that God the Father and Jesus Christ appeared to Joseph Smith, that through Joseph they restored the proper authority to perform saving ordinances for the living as well as the dead, that Joseph translated—through divine inspiration—an ancient text telling how Jesus visited people in the New World, and that through Joseph, God restored the ancient temple ceremony, including eternal marriage, hardly seem superfluous!

Instead of merely asserting that the above are superfluous, Owen and Mosser argue that the body of information necessary for salvation is contained in the Bible (see O&M, 9–10). And this, coupled with the claim that there is nothing God wants us to know except what is necessary for salvation, would entail that God does not have anything more to reveal. The second claim seems strange indeed; what reason could God have for wanting us to have salvation-essential knowledge only? Surely the Bible itself contains much information that is not essential to salvation. But laying this puzzle aside, let us consider the first premise of this argument. Why should we concede that the Bible contains all that is necessary for salvation? Owen and Mosser argue that our own

---

7 See Owen and Mosser, 10 n. 17, where they appear to explicitly concede this point.
8 We might point out that the Book of Mormon is not anticlimactic, even in this sense. Indeed, it covers the climactic part of salvation history and emphasizes its importance by underlining the testimonies of the apostles.
third and fourth Articles of Faith together entail that faith, repentance, baptism, and the gift of the Holy Ghost are "all that is necessary" for salvation. But these can all be found in the Bible. Furthermore, they claim that Robinson agrees with them. However, it seems clear that the third and fourth Articles of Faith do not entail this. The third article acknowledges that we believe through the atonement of Christ all mankind may be saved through obedience to the laws and ordinances of the gospel. However, the fourth Article of Faith does not purport to describe all these laws and ordinances. Indeed, it specifically enumerates only the "first" of these. Usually, when we identify something (or some set) as a first we imply that there are others. So, the articles themselves seem to imply that faith, repentance, baptism, and the Holy Ghost may not be enough.

Moreover, in making our position clear on this point, we need to be precise about what we mean by the word salvation. In Mormon discourse salvation has several different meanings, and it is not clear that any of them is identical to what Owen and Mosser mean when they use the term. In some contexts, salvation refers to being resurrected and having immortality. In others, salvation means inheriting the celestial kingdom. And finally, in some uses of the term someone is saved only if she inherits all that God has—i.e., the highest degree of glory in the celestial kingdom. Latter-day Saints usually refer to this latter state as "exaltation."

Now it is clearly the case that Latter-day Saints should not admit that all that is necessary for exaltation is included in the Bible. Indeed, the personal temple ordinances, eternal marriage,

---

9 We think that by "all the truth 'necessary'" (O&M, 10), they mean "severally necessary and jointly sufficient."

10 Robinson says, "the only obedience necessary to be born again is obeying the commandments to have faith in Christ, to repent and to be baptized" (HWD, 157). It is not clear that this means that he thinks this is all that is necessary for salvation. But if so, we wonder how to square such a claim with Book of Mormon teachings such as that found in 2 Nephi 31:16: "Unless a man shall endure to the end, in following the example of the Son of the living God, he cannot be saved."

11 Not "imply" in a logical sense but in a conversational sense.

12 See Dallin H. Oaks, "Have You Been Saved?" Ensign, May 1998, 55–57, where he discusses various meanings of being saved for the LDS audience.
and work for the dead are hardly mentioned there—if at all. And how these latter ordinances should be carried out is certainly not explained. So it should not be conceded that the Bible contains all that is necessary for salvation in the event that *salvation* and *exaltation* are used synonymously. Of course, one might say that salvation and exaltation are different things (as Latter-day Saints often do). If so, then Owen and Mosser's argument for a closed canon clearly breaks down at a different point. Indeed, if salvation is not exaltation, but if exaltation is ultimately what God wants for all of his children, then it would follow that even if the Bible contains all that is necessary for salvation God might have much more that he would want to reveal.

But even if we supposed that all the information that is necessary for salvation is included in the Bible, it does not follow that the canon must be closed. First, one might think that the Bible tells us *what* must be done and not *how* it should be done. For example, let us suppose that the Bible clearly affirms that baptism is necessary for salvation. This information alone would not suffice to make it clear how baptism must be performed and who has the authority to perform it. And even if the Bible contained information relevant to the resolution of these two matters, it wouldn't necessarily follow that at some given time someone possessed the requisite authority. Finally, even if the Bible contained all the knowledge that one must have in order to be saved,\(^\text{13}\) it doesn't follow that every sincere student of the Bible would interpret this potentially saving information in the same way. For, notoriously, the Bible admits of different plausible interpretations. Yet, to the extent that these interpretations conflict, at most one of them can be correct. Finding the correct interpretation is, no doubt, a difficult task, but only that interpretation will enable us to be saved. So,

\(^{13}\) There is a tacit assumption at work in this line of thinking that might be questioned. The assumption is that it is information alone that is necessary for salvation—i.e., once one has all the information that is necessary for salvation then nothing else is necessary. But this is questionable. Latter-day Saints claim that even if we know the "what" and "how" of salvation we still need the proper authority. Authority itself comes from God and so it would seem to require some kind of revelation. Of course, this kind of revelation is not propositional (i.e., informational) but rather performative, and hence would not be included in a canon. So, it seems that the existence of this sort of continuing revelation would not imply that the canon is open.
God would want to make it possible for us to ascertain the correct interpretation. One way that he could do this is to give us further revelation (which might subsequently be canonized as new scripture) that could help us to know the correct interpretations (e.g., that to be salvifically efficacious baptism must be by immersion and must be performed by someone with the proper authority). To be sure, new scripture itself might require interpretation and hence the need for a living prophet and, as needed, ongoing revelation. Otherwise, our scriptural understanding becomes merely scribal and without authority. Joseph Smith's first vision came in response to his prayerful petition for divine help when he found he could not settle opposing doctrinal claims by an appeal to the Bible, since proponents of the opposing claims all professed biblical warrant for their position, but each understood the same verses differently. A striking case in point is the failure of biblical scholars to come to consensus on the meaning of Paul's reference to baptism for the dead in 1 Corinthians 15:29. According to B. M. Foschini there are at least forty different interpretations of this verse. How great the need then for a living prophet who can authoritatively declare, "Thus saith the Lord."

Owen and Mosser continue Blomberg's defense of a closed canon based on the three criteria of apostolicity, agreement with previous scripture, and widespread use in the churches (see O&M, 10–11). They are not impressed with Robinson's claim that the LDS scriptures are apostolic in character, since this seems to expand the definition of apostolic. So, what is their definition of apostolic? They explain: "When Evangelicals speak of an apostolic person or writing they are referring to the foundational apostles of the first century" (O&M, 11). But, of course, with this definition, the insistence that scripture be apostolic begs the question in the debate about whether the canon is closed. Of course the canon is closed if anyone who might have contributed to it is long since dead. But why should we think that only the apostles of the first century could receive revelation from God? This is just another form of the question as to why the canon should be closed.

---

An additional argument given by Owen and Mosser for the closed canon is what they call the “advent argument.” The basic idea is that after the closing of the Old Testament canon there was to be no new revelation until the advent of Christ. So, when Malachi points to the coming of the Messiah he is pointing to the next event in “salvation history.” But then, by analogy, when the Revelation of John points to the second advent of Christ (see Revelation 22:12, 20), it is also pointing to the next event in “salvation history.” And since Owen and Mosser argue that Malachi has established God’s pattern of revelation (see O&M, 14–15), we can assume that there will be no further revelation from God until the second coming.

Owen and Mosser anticipate one Mormon response. In a footnote they say “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 time” (O&M, 16 n. 27). This is exactly what Latter-day Saints should do, since the descendants of Lehi in America continued to receive revelation during this time. And it is not clear from what Malachi says (about John the Baptist and Jesus) that there cannot be revelation given after his work and before the advent of Christ—such a conclusion would only seem to follow if one admits, with Owen and Mosser, that with the close of the Old Testament dispensation comes a silence from God. Why should believers in the Book of Mormon buy such a thesis? So, the advent argument also seems to beg the question.

Another problem with the advent argument is that the argument hinges on an analogy between Malachi and Revelation. This analogy can hold only if Revelation was the last written document of the New Testament. Yet, Elwell and De Young in the Evangelical Commentary on the Bible seem to admit the possibility that Revelation was written before the Epistles of John. Should the claim that the canon is effectively closed hinge on tenuous textual dating techniques?

A final problem with the advent argument is that there is revelation (e.g., the annunciation) that precedes the advent of

Christ and is preparatory to his coming. Latter-day Saints claim that modern-day revelation is similarly preparatory for Jesus’ second advent. Owen and Mosser might assert that the two situations are disanalogous in that pre-first-advent revelation immediately proceeded Christ’s appearance while the LDS pre-second-advent revelation preceded Christ’s appearance by a much longer period of time. Indeed, we are still waiting for that second advent. It is difficult, though, to see how such disanalogy matters. God’s and man’s timetables have always been out of sync. The earliest Christians apparently expected Christ’s second advent in their own lifetimes.  

Although, as we have seen, the burden of persuasion rests with those who would argue that the canon is closed, we still might make some Bible-based arguments for the claim that the canon is open. One such argument could be based on John 14:26: “But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you.”

On its face, this passage indicates that even after Jesus is gone the Comforter will come to teach the Saints “all things.” This would seem to indicate that revelation will continue, even after the ascension of Christ. Indeed, the Comforter’s bringing to the Saints’ remembrance all that Christ has taught them does not seem equivalent to his teaching them all things since the relevant clauses are conjoined by an and and not a that is or some such locution. Of course, this is not how believers in a closed canon read this passage. They go out of their way to make the point that this passage

---

16 Owen and Mosser might find a second disanalogy between the two situations. Latter-day Saints have already “canonized” the modern pre-second-advent revelations before Jesus’ arrival, whereas the revelations given to Mary and others before Jesus’ birth were not recorded and canonized until much later. This issue is relevant because, strictly speaking, it is the issue of an open canon that is under discussion and not the issue of whether there is continuing revelation. To be sure, the issues are related, but the presence of communication between God and humans does not establish that the record of this communication could have been recorded and made canon before Jesus’ advent. Nevertheless, at least the possibility of revelation before the advent seems to weaken the advent argument against an open canon. And it does suggest that there can be continuing revelation before the second advent.
does not support the idea of continuing new revelation. For example, Sanders says,

The teaching which Jesus has given during his ministry on earth is to be continued by the Paraclete, sent in his name (i.e. as his representative, cf. xiv. 14) who will guarantee that it is remembered and understood, but will not add any new revelation of his own (cf. xvi. 13 f.), since that given in Jesus is complete (cf. xiv. 9). 17

John 16:13, cited as evidence for the claim that the Paraclete will add no new information, says: “Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will shew you things to come.”

Now strictly speaking this does not say that the Spirit will not teach anything new. Rather, it says that he will not teach anything of his own accord—it will all come from Christ. But this does not entail that he will not teach anything new unless we assume that Christ will have nothing new to teach us. And it is this very assumption that is in question in the debate about the open canon. Without this assumption (which we cannot make without begging the question) this scripture seems to imply that new revelation is possible.

One possible reply to our argument is based on John 14:9: “Jesus saith unto him, Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known me, Phillip? he that hath seen me hath seen the Father; and how sayest thou then, Shew us the Father?” Here Jesus seems to indicate that he is the fullest revelation of God to man. There is no difference between seeing the Father and the Son. Does that entail that he cannot go on to teach us more? To assume that it does is to assume that Jesus’ revelation during his first earthly ministry is all there is to his revelation. But this is not so. There will be a second advent. And we can assume that Jesus’ revelation of God in this second advent will not be superfluous.

Admittedly this biblical exegesis proves neither the existence of continuing revelation nor the possibility of an open canon. Yet, it seems clear that without the assumption that there can be no continuing revelation as a guide in interpreting John 14:26, this scripture seems to indicate that there can be continuing revelation that will add to our understanding.

**Biblical Inerrancy**

The next scriptural issue addressed is biblical inerrancy. Owen and Mosser express much satisfaction with Robinson’s view on the inerrancy of scripture. They do, however, point out an apparent tension between Robinson’s commitment to inerrancy and his view of revelation (see O&M, 20). Robinson’s view of revelation is one in which revelation is primarily an experience on the part of a prophet with God (see *How Wide the Divide?* 57–59; hereafter HWD). This experience is then recorded in what may become scripture. The experience is immediate revelation; the written record is mediated revelation (see HWD, 57). The problem, we take it, that Owen and Mosser see coming from this view of revelation is that there is no reason to think that the record will be entirely accurate. This is because the revelation is not verbally inspired (see HWD, 56). The words are not God’s words but the prophet’s words. And the prophet is human and fallible. We believe this is a real problem that Robinson must deal with. The main question is what the “mediacy” of the written record is supposed to be. Perhaps the written record is considered mediated not because some of what it claims is false but because its manner of expression is the prophet’s and not God’s. The prophet’s manner of expression might be less precise than God’s and yet still be entirely correct. The lack of precision in the manner of expression does not preclude verisimilitude in what is expressed. So, the mere fact that the words are not God’s does not imply that they are not correct.\(^{18}\)

\(^{18}\) Another tactic in dealing with this problem would be to argue that not only does God put the ideas in the mind of the prophet but he also supplies the manner of expression of those ideas. But this seems to abandon the very position to be defended, since it is to effectively claim that the written scripture is unmediated revelation. Robinson seems to want to avoid such a position: “The
Robinson advocates a view of the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible that denies that its sole purpose is to restore the original ancient text (see HWD, 63). The apparent reason for this view, according to Owen and Mosser, is that it allows Latter-day Saints to avoid the criticism of Smith’s prophetic calling based on the fact that there is little evidence that Smith’s changes restore original text. Robinson believes that Smith’s changes include both changes to the original text as well as restorations of the original text (see HWD, 64). One purpose for these changes is to include plain and precious truths that have been lost not because of cutting from the texts we do have but because of the exclusion of texts from the corpus. For Owen and Mosser this seems to be an ad hoc solution to the problem. The problem, they seem to think, is that this eliminates the JST as a piece of evidence with which to check the accuracy of Joseph Smith’s translating abilities.

However, we don’t see how this is a necessarily ad hoc solution to the problem. First, it is not clear that we should only accept claims made about the JST in the event that these claims are in some way verifiable or falsifiable by “advances in the discovery and study of ancient manuscripts” (O&M, 23). This claim smacks of positivism and would certainly come back to undercut the evangelical’s position insofar as it is committed to a view of the Bible that is hardly verifiable or falsifiable by current scholarly methods of biblical inquiry. And there is certainly no logical inconsistency in the claim that some of the JST is a restoration of ancient text and much of it is not. Perhaps Owen and Mosser mean to suggest that this is some sort of methodological or practical inconsistency, but they fail to explain what this would be.

Second, there seems to be some independent reason for thinking that the JST is not a literal restoration of the original ancient text. Indeed, Joseph himself may have had a broader view of authorship than we do, and we would need to take this into account when we read his claims that it is a “translation.” Indeed, this is exactly what Phillip Barlow argues in his book Mormons

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. However, the recording, transmission and interpretation of the word depend on fallible human beings, using the fallible human tools of reason and language” (HWD, 57).
and the Bible. He claims that it was widespread practice in the early nineteenth century for later writers to make additions to an author’s corpus. He says, “Numerous examples from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries would show that editorial tampering was frequent, that what we now think of as plagiarism was a fairly widespread practice.”

And he points out that Dean Jessee has shown that Joseph Smith participated in this common editorial practice. Couple this with Joseph’s belief in his own prophetic calling, and it is not hard to see how Joseph might have felt that he could make any emendations to the text, even if they were not part of the original, and yet call the result a “translation.” Indeed, whatever emendations he would make would be inspired of God. And scripture is the word of God. To further bolster this case, Barlow points out that such a practice was not uncommon among the ancients. Indeed, “David is spoken of as author of the Psalms, and Moses as author of the Pentateuch, even though parts of these works were composed many hundreds of years after the traditional author’s death.” Barlow concludes by saying,

Joseph Smith, like many of the biblical writers, felt he had received revelation and inspiration from God. With his broad sense of authorship and his strong sense of prophetic license, he felt the authority—indeed, the calling—to inculcate his insights into his revision of scripture, much as prophetic writers in ancient times had done.

In light of this argument, Robinson’s theory of the JST seems hardly ad hoc.

---

20 Ibid., 59.
22 See Barlow, Mormons and the Bible, 61.
24 Barlow, Mormons and the Bible, 61.
Nevertheless, we believe that it is proper for Owen and Mosser to be worried about Robinson’s theory. But the problem is not that it is ad hoc but that it might run into trouble with Robinson’s commitment to the inerrancy of the Bible. Indeed, some of the changes made by Joseph Smith change the propositional content of the Bible entirely. For example, instead of Nathan telling David that he has been forgiven of God for his sins (as the KJV reads), in the JST Nathan tells him that he has not been forgiven. How must Robinson deal with such revisions? Suppose that they are taken to be not restorations of the original, but emendations of the original to accord with true doctrine. This would imply the falsity of claims made by the original text, thus implying the falsity of biblical inerrancy. So, they must be restorations of the original text, according to Robinson’s view. But then this is where the previous problem raised by Owen and Mosser arises again. Is there evidence for these changes? Is there evidence that one of the scribes simply dropped the “not” from the original text? If not—and in this case it seems that the evidence points the other way—then Robinson has not solved the problem that his theory of the JST was meant to solve. Here we suggest that Robinson abandon the claim of biblical inerrancy—but, of course, this would make the divide wider.

Owen and Mosser claim that Robinson’s view about the JST is methodologically inconsistent with his rejection of an expansionist view of the Book of Mormon (see O&M, 23). At least, Robinson does owe us an explanation as to why such a loose understanding of translation can be applied to Joseph’s translation of the JST and a much more strict understanding must be applied to his translation of the Book of Mormon. As it turns out there is evidence for a much more literal translation of the Book of Mormon.25 Unlike the case of the JST, Joseph Smith translated from an actual text in the case of the Book of Mormon. And so, it seems that there is reason to think that the JST is translated loosely and the Book of Mormon was translated strictly. There is nothing (even methodologically) inconsistent in such an assertion. However, Robinson seems to claim that an expansionist view of the

translation of the Book of Mormon is *in principle* unorthodox and not just a view that fails to match up to the facts.26 Perhaps this is what Owen and Mosser believe counts as methodological inconsistency.

**The Nature of God**

**Divine Finitude**

Owen and Mosser challenge Robinson and other Latter-day Saints on the issue of the possible finitude of God. Indeed, in their final conclusion they identify four fundamental aspects of contemporary LDS theology, which they maintain remain “outside the boundary of Christian orthodoxy.” The first is a “theologically27 unacceptable form of finite theism” (O&M, 81). However, Robinson explicitly repudiates the allegation that Mormon theism is finitistic, claiming that Latter-day Saints, like evangelicals, understand God to be “omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable” (HWD, 77). This list of divine attributes is very unlikely to cause the average Latter-day Saint any consternation and, indeed, each can be found in uniquely LDS scripture. The difference between Latter-day Saints and evangelicals hinges not on the names of the attributes ascribed to God, but on how they are best defined.28 Owen and Mosser correctly point

---


27 We think it significant that Owen and Mosser object to an LDS formulation of divine omnipotence on the ground that is *theologically* as opposed to *biblically* unacceptable. Indeed, the biblical writers never mention the *logical* modalities in which the traditional definitions are couched. These formulations are a product of rational theologizing, not revelation.

28 Perhaps Robinson is doing what is often done in LDS circles. Latter-day Saints do commonly use these terms with an intended meaning different than those offered by traditional Christians. Since one of the fundamental purposes of *How Wide the Divide?* is to eliminate problems of communication arising out of our using the same terminology to express different ideas, for Robinson to make the above claim without further clarification seems not in the spirit of the project—unless, of course, he *does* have the traditional definitions in mind.
out that a number of Latter-day Saints, including Paulsen in his 1975 doctoral dissertation, have described LDS theism as finitistic. Thus they seem justified in raising the question. There are many issues here, and some are rather complex, but we will try to address as many of them as possible.

At the outset, it is important to note that Paulsen no longer uses the term finite nor its cognates to describe the LDS understanding of God. This is not because he thinks the term, when correctly understood, is inapplicable to God, but because the term is almost always misunderstood and because the term now seems to him to be rhetorically inappropriate, even when correctly understood. To understand this last point, we need to clarify how Paulsen used the term. In his dissertation, Paulsen defines ‘finitism’ as the claim that there are logically possible (i.e., not self-contradictory) states of affairs that God cannot bring about—i.e., S is \( \text{finite}_p \) if and only if there exists a logically possible state of affairs such that S cannot bring it about. Traditionally speaking, the claim that God is omnipotent has been understood to mean that he is not limited in any substantive way. What this means has been a matter of some disagreement. But there is general consensus about the meaning of this among philosophers of religion. The consensus is that this means that God is subject to no non-logical constraints. So, God could not create a round square. But he could create a square of any possible size. Being limited by logic is not really being limited at all (or so the thinking goes) since logical truth is conceptual truth and not substantive truth—it tells us nothing about the way the world is, and so God is not limited by anything in the world. To state this idea precisely, one would say that S is \( \text{omnipotent}_p \) if and only if S can bring about any logically possible state of affairs. To put this in terms of the now popular “possible worlds” ontology: S is omnipotent\(_p\) if and only if for any possible world \( w \), S can make \( w \) actual. Notice that if God is omnipotent\(_p\), then he is not finite\(_p\)—given Paulsen’s definition.

\[29\] Finite\(_p\) refers to Paulsen’s stipulated definition of finite.
\[30\] See David L. Paulsen, “Comparative Coherency of Mormon (Finitistic) and Classical Theism” (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1975), 93.
\[31\] The subscript \( T \) stands for the traditional definition of omnipotence.
However, there have been other ways of construing the traditional notion of omnipotence. For instance, in order to make his free-will defense work, Alvin Plantinga claims that even though God is omnipotent, he cannot make just any possible world actual, since in some possible worlds we make free choices. And it is a conceptual contradiction to say that God could "ensure" that we freely choose to act in a certain way. One's free choice is, by definition, something that is in one's own control and not in anyone else's, not even God's. So, Plantinga acknowledges that God, even though omnipotent, cannot bring about just any logically possible world—for example, he cannot bring about a world in which persons always freely choose the right, even though such a world is logically possible. Rather, he argues that the claim that God is omnipotent should be understood as the claim that God can bring about any possible world that is logically possible for him to bring about. In other words, $S$ is omnipotent if and only if $S$ can bring about any world $w$ such that $S$'s bringing about $w$ involves no logical contradiction.\footnote{Notice that Plantinga's point entails that the traditional definition of God's omnipotence, captured in the definition of omnipotence, is inconsistent. Indeed, it would be possible for God to bring about states of affairs that only free agents can bring about. And this is a contradiction. So, there is a very real sense in which Plantinga's understanding of omnipotence is just an attempt to get at the consistent core of the traditional understanding that God is limited by logic alone. See Alvin Plantinga, The Nature of Necessity (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974), 164–95. The subscript $A$ indicates that this is Alvin Plantinga's definition of omnipotence. For a more thorough attempt to refine the traditional notion of omnipotence see Thomas P. Flint and Alfred J. Freddoso, "Maximal Power," in The Existence and Nature of God, ed. Alfred J. Freddoso (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 81–113.}

Although Plantinga's definition of omnipotence verbally differs only slightly from the traditional definition, this difference, substantively speaking, is very significant. Indeed, on Plantinga's definition God can be both omnipotent and finite. From an LDS point of view, it is also significant that Plantinga sees the free choices of individuals as limiting the states of affairs that God can bring about. Indeed, it is this very feature of his free-will defense that makes it such a strong defense against the problem of evil. We would be interested to learn whether Owen and Mosser would also be inclined to accept Plantinga's understanding of omnipotence.
If so, they too would have a finitistic conception of God—given Paulsen’s technical definition of the term. If not, then we would be interested in seeing how they deal with the problem of moral evil—an issue that we discuss further below.33

Nevertheless, either the more traditional or Plantinga’s way of defining omnipotence leaves us with a formulation with which most Latter-day Saints would be (or, at least, should be) uncomfortable. Clearly, Latter-day Saints not only believe that God cannot create free agents whilst determining what it is they will choose, but they also believe that he encounters other substantive limitations as well. Both their belief in divine embodiment and their denial of ex nihilo creation point to this. Latter-day Saints believe that God is embodied. It is difficult to see how one could define body without implying that God has certain spatial and temporal limitations.34 For example, an embodied person is limited in the sense that he cannot be bodily present everywhere or at everywhen. One might say that God’s body is non-essential to him; i.e., he could at any time “disembodify” himself. But then this would greatly minimize the LDS view of God and make it hardly different from the traditional Christian notion—since non-LDS Christians often affirm that God can at will take on or put off bodily form.35

33 We assume that with their preference for Arminianism over Calvinism Owen and Moser accept a substantive notion (libertarian?) of free will.

34 Indeed, if we define a body as the matter occupying some particular region of space, then, by definition, that body cannot be in two regions of space at one time. And being in two regions of space at one time is certainly logically possible. For the property of redness, if there is such a thing, can be at two different places at one time. And the belief that there are properties such as redness is certainly not logically contradictory, even if it is false. Compare Grace M. Dyck [Jantzen], “Omnipresence and Incorporeality,” Religious Studies 13 (1977): 85-91.

35 Indeed, Robinson seems to make a similar move when he claims that “God has a body, but God’s body does not have him” (HWD, 88-89). Robinson argues that God can be omnipresent even if he has a body. The idea is that although God has a body his spirit is everywhere present. But it is important to remember that for Latter-day Saints spirit is matter (see D&C 131:7) and not immaterial. And so to say that God’s spirit is everywhere is tantamount to saying that God is identifiable with material reality. This makes Robinson’s position dangerously close to pantheism—or, at least, panentheism. The proof of this is as follows: Suppose that God’s spirit is in every spatiotemporal region,
Similarly, the LDS denial of creation *ex nihilo* also makes an affirmation of the traditional definition of omnipotence untenable for them. For it follows from the fact that there are uncreated (and noncreatable) entities, coeternal with God, that there are many logically possible states of affairs that God cannot bring about although his bringing them about would involve no logical contradiction. B. H. Roberts clearly saw this implication of the LDS denial of creation *ex nihilo* and modified his notion of omnipotence accordingly. On his construal of omnipotence, $S$ is omnipotent$_r$, just in case $S$ can bring about any states of affairs consistent with the nature of eternal existences. A broader definition of omnipotence and one that would be equivalent to Roberts's in the LDS context is that $S$ is omnipotent$_p$, just in case $S$ can bring about any state of affairs such that $S$'s bringing it about is consistent with the ontological structure of uncreate reality. Clearly, a being that is omnipotent$_r$ can also be finite$_r$, but then so can a being that is omnipotent$_A$. So, we might give a more refined notion of finitude as follows: $S$ is finite$_D$ if and only if there is a state of affairs $A$ such that there is no logical contradiction involved in $S$'s bringing about $A$ but $S$ cannot bring about that $A$. On this definition of finitude a being that is omnipotent$_r$ and not omnipotent$_A$ is finite$_D$. However, for reasons already noted, Paulsen believes it better to omit the term finite and its cognates in describing God's omnipotence.

As Owen and Mosser point out, the idea that God is not omnipotent$_r$ gives us an apparently easy solution to the problem of evil (see O&M, 27 n. 50). However, their acceptance of Professor Appleby's claim that such a solution "involves the curtailment of traditional claims about divine power, denying omnipotence and insisting that God has none of the miraculous powers attributed to no matter how small. Since space-time is continuous, for every region in which some of God's spirit is present any proper part of that region has God's spirit. Suppose that God is not materially identical to the whole material universe. Then there is some matter that is not identical with a part of God's spirit, and none of whose parts are identical to a part of God's spirit. Choose the most minimal region occupied by this matter. No two material objects can occupy precisely the same location, since a material object is, by definition, something that occupies a particular location. So, God's spirit is not present in the chosen region. So, by reductio, if God's spirit is literally present in every region of space then God's spirit is identical with the material universe.
him in Christian literature” is a mistake. Appleby’s reasoning here is fallacious. God’s not being omnipotent does not entail that he cannot perform miracles—whether those miracles be construed as violations of natural laws or just a result of God’s understanding and utilizing natural law in a way transcending human ken.

Indeed, it would be fair to say that a God who is not omnipotent could still be omnipotent in the biblical sense of the term, where by this we might mean that God is supreme, having power over all things so that no one or nothing can thwart the fulfillment of his purposes and promises. This is the implicit definition given of ‘omnipotence’ in the Lectures on Faith. Owen and Mosser make the objection that if God is omnipotent in this sense but not omnipotent, then it is logically possible that there could be a being more powerful than God who could thwart his will. But this involves an equivocation of modalities. It is one thing to say that given the way things are God can ensure the success of his plan, and it is another thing to say that God could ensure his plan no matter how things might have been. Surely if there were an evil omnipotent being, then God could not ensure the fulfillment of his purposes and promises. But there is no such evil omnipotent being, nor could there ever be one. God repeatedly tells us in the scriptures that his promises are sure, and we should believe him. What matters is that God can and will fulfill all his purposes and promises in the actual world, not what could possibly be imagined.


37 Compare Lecture 2, paragraph 2: “We here observe that God is the only supreme governor and independent being in whom all fulness and perfection dwell. He is omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient, without beginning of days or end of life”; and Lecture 4, paragraph 12, which explicates the prior paragraph as follows: “For unless God had power over all things, and was able by his power to control all things and thereby deliver his creatures who put their trust in him from the power of all beings that might seek their destruction, whether in heaven, on earth, or in hell, men could not be saved. But with the idea of the existence of this attribute planted in the mind, men who put their trust in God feel as though they have nothing to fear, believing that he has power to save all who come to him to the very uttermost.”
On the other hand, although the LDS understanding of the nature of divine omnipotence gives us a clear way out of the problem of evil, it is far from clear that evangelical theology does the same.

**Divine Embodiment**

On the LDS doctrine of divine embodiment, Owen and Mosser hedge a bit, hinting that they (or at least some evangelicals) may be open to the possibility of God's being in some sense embodied. It is significant here that they confine their reservations about LDS belief to the claim that God the Father is embodied, presumably finding unproblematic the embodiment of the Son. Consider the following: (1) They acknowledge, of course, that God the Son was embodied in the person of Jesus of Nazareth and that he continues to exist as a resurrected body although "by choice, not by metaphysical necessity" (O&M, 47 n. 105).38 (2) They concede that God the Father has "appeared" in the form of a man, but his appearances should not be confused with what he is essentially. (3) They claim that if God the Father does have some form of body, then texts such as Ezekiel 1:26-28 and Daniel 7:9 seem to indicate that it is not a "body of flesh and bones as tangible as man's." Thus they conclude that "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" (O&M, 35). And, finally, (4) they opine that "some Latter-day Saints may rightly feel that Robinson jumps ship too quickly" in denying that there is any clear Old Testament support for the concept that God the Father is embodied (O&M, 35 n. 71, emphasis added).

Now, Owen and Mosser explain the appearance of anthropomorphic language in the Bible by acknowledging that God can take on the form of a human body. But, they claim, this does not imply that God is embodied in the way that Latter-day Saints claim (see O&M, 32-33). Yet it seems to us that it is just as consistent with the anthropomorphic language of the Bible to claim that God is embodied in a body of flesh and bones. Indeed, a

---

38 If the Son can shed his resurrected body at any time he chooses, then what is the point of his being resurrected?
more natural and literal reading of the Bible leads us to the conclusion that God is embodied in this way. However, we admit that it is the further revelation from the LDS canon that assures us that this is the case.

Of course, the important point here is whether the view that God (the Father) is embodied is consistent with the Bible. Owen and Mosser offer the classic proof text for the claim that it is not. John 4:24 NIV says, “God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and truth.” In note 64, Owen and Mosser claim that, contrary to what Latter-day Saints believe, the affirmation that God is a spirit is not a predication of composition but an essential predication. Their argument is that Jesus’ claim is given in the context of the Samaritan woman’s query about her ancestors worshiping on the mountain and the Jews worshiping in Jerusalem. In other words, she is concerned about where she should worship. Jesus answers by saying that “God is spirit” and hence implies that he has no location. This would seem to indicate, Owen and Mosser claim, that Jesus is talking about God’s essence.

However, this reading is not the only possible one. For instance, Sanders argues:

That God is spirit is not meant as a definition of God’s being—though this is how the Stoics would have understood it. It is a metaphor of his mode of operation, as life-giving power, and it is no more to be taken literally than I John i. 5, “God is light”, or Deut. iv. 24, “Your God is a devouring fire”. It is only those who have received this power through Christ who can offer God a real worship.39

And so, if we may take the claim that God is spirit as metaphorical and not essential predication then we can avoid the implication that this scripture is inconsistent with God’s being embodied. Instead of reading Jesus’ statement as saying that it does not matter where you worship because God is not located, we should read it as saying that it does not matter where you worship as long as it is done in the right spirit and in truth.

On the other hand, suppose that we do take the interpretation of this passage by Owen and Mosser as the correct one, i.e., that “God is a spirit” is an essential predication. Does it show that God is an immaterial being? We think it does not. This is because we think that there is evidence that the Greek word translated as “spirit”—i.e., pneuma—is not most naturally read as indicating an immaterial substance. Indeed, one of the great advocates of the immaterialism of God, Origen himself, thought that John 4:24 could be construed as a proof text for the position he railed against. He says,

I know that some will attempt to say that, even according to the declarations of our own Scriptures, God is a body, because . . . they find it said . . . in the Gospel according to John, that “God is a spirit, and they who worship Him must worship Him in spirit and truth.” . . . spirit, according to them, [is] to be regarded as nothing else than a body.

It is significant indeed that Origen thought he needed to respond to those who used John 4:24 to establish that God is a body. If pneuma clearly referred to an immaterial substance, then such a response would be superfluous. And it is not just unsophisticated laymen who would have advocated the embodiment view as based on a scripture like John 4:24. Indeed, Tertullian advocated such a view and used John 4:24 in his defense. Tertullian claimed that God was “a body, although ‘God is a Spirit,’” for “Spirit has a bodily substance of its own kind.” Clearly, this indicates that the more natural reading of John 4:24 would have implied that God is embodied—at least by the lights of some of the early church fathers. We should be skeptical about the use of John 4:24 to support the immaterialist position. Wolfson agrees with this understanding of how the church fathers would have understood

---

42 Tertullian, Against Praxeas 7, in ANF, 3:602.
such a passage, and he even concludes that the immaterialist understanding of the passage is unfounded. He says, “in Scripture ... there is no indication that by spirit and soul were meant any such principles as form or immateriality.”

Deification

If there is any aspect on which one might think the divide between Latter-day Saints and evangelicals would be very wide indeed it would be on the LDS doctrine that man can become as God is. But surprisingly the divide does not seem so wide given Robinson’s reading of LDS theology. He talks about the “official doctrine of the Church on deification” as being no more and no less than what is taught in the Bible and the Doctrine and Covenants. Of course, the question is how these passages should be interpreted. Robinson claims that

Those who are exalted by [God’s] grace will always be “gods” (always with a small g, even in the Doctrine and Covenants) by grace, by an extension of his power, and will always be subordinate to the Godhead. In the Greek philosophical sense—and in the “orthodox” theological sense—such contingent beings would not even rightly be called “gods,” since they never become “the ground of all being” and are forever subordinate to their Father. Any teaching beyond this involves speculation without support from either the Bible or the other LDS scriptures, and these are waters I refuse to swim in. (HWD, 86)

Robinson seems to be making several claims about the LDS doctrine of deification, and thus about how we should interpret the passages in the scriptures to which he refers. Here are some of the claims he makes:

1. Those who are exalted are gods and not Gods, where the lowercase g seems to indicate an ontological and not merely a qualitative difference.

---

2. Those who are exalted are gods by grace and by extension of the power of God.

3. Those who are exalted, and thus gods, will always be subordinate to the Godhead.

4. Those who will be gods are not gods in any sense that would be recognized by traditional Christians or philosophers.

5. Those who will be gods are contingent beings. (We can only suppose that by ‘contingent’ Robinson has the traditional philosophical notion in mind.)

6. God is the ground of all being.

Now we assert that all but two of these claims are interpretations of the cited scriptures that are, at least, subject to question; and one of the remaining two is quite misleading although strictly speaking true. Thus, far from avoiding speculation about deification, Robinson speculates and does so in a way that makes his theory more likely to be false than not. Our argument contra Robinson here relies on the fact that he accepts Joseph Smith’s “King Follett Discourse” (KFD) as, in part, definitive of the LDS view of deification. Indeed, he accepts it as “quasi-official” and, de facto, equally as determining of LDS doctrine on this matter as the canon (HWD, 85–86).

Regarding the first point, the most widely circulated version of the KFD claims that we have to learn to become “Gods” ourselves, and that is God with a capital G. Apparently Joseph Fielding Smith, the compiler of this version of Joseph’s famous

---


45 Ibid., 346. This claim is also true of most other versions of the discourse. Indeed, the Bullock version says, “you have got to learn to be a God yourself”; the Larson version says, “You have got to learn how to make yourselves Gods”; the Woodruff version says, “And you have got to learn to make yourselves God”; and the Richards version says, “you have got to know how to make yourselves Gods.” It is only the Clayton version that differs: “You have got to learn to be a god yourself in order to save yourself—to be priests [sic] and kings as all Gods has [sic] done.” These quotations are from The Prophet Joseph Smith’s King Follett Discourse: A Six-Column Comparison of Original Notes and Amalgamations, comp. Donald Cannon and Larry Dahl (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1983), 30–31. Clearly, the textual evidence supports the claim that Joseph did not make a nominal distinction between Gods and gods.
sermon, did not find it necessary to draw the nominal distinction so as to point to some fundamental ontological distinction, as Robinson seems to want to do. Of course, this might just be an accident of nomenclature if it were not the case that the KFD did not make it clear that there is no ontological distinction between God and Man. Consider, for example, the following quotes:

Here, then, is eternal life—to know the only wise and true God; and you have got to learn how to be Gods yourselves, and to be kings and priests to God, the same as all Gods have done before you.46

To inherit the same power, the same glory and the same exaltation, until you arrive at the station of a God.47

It is the first principle of the Gospel to know for a certainty the Character of God, and to know that we may converse with him as one man converses with another, and that he was once a man like us; yea, that God himself, the Father of us all, dwelt on an earth.48

We say that God himself is a self-existent being. Who told you so? It is correct enough; but how did it get into your heads? Who told you that man did not exist in like manner upon the same principles? Man does exist upon the same principles.49

The first tells us that we will be the same as all the Gods before us. One would be hard pressed to claim that this allows for an ontological distinction between us and those Gods. The second tells us that we inherit the same power, glory, and exaltation as God. The third clearly puts God in a position similar to ours (or at least Jesus’) at some point in the past. Again, the relationship between us and God seems to be more like that of a literal father to his child than of one ontological category to another. The final quotation explicitly claims that man is self-existent in the same way

47 Ibid., 347.
48 Ibid., 345–46.
49 Ibid., 352.
that God is. If by ‘self-existent’ Joseph means something like "being the reason and ground for its own existence," then this clearly implies that man is just as ontologically fundamental as God. The difference between God and us, then, is a matter of degree and not of ontological category.

Second, we are exalted by grace and by the extension of the power of God. This seems basically correct so long as one understands the necessity of man’s cooperative effort in the process. For instance, Joseph says that “you have got to learn how to be Gods yourselves.”50 And this seemingly implies that we must do some of the work. Moreover, saying that we arrive at the station of a God seems to imply not that we participate in God’s station as a God, but that we have our own station of Godhood. At the very least, it is difficult to see where the idea of participation in God’s power comes from in the scriptures. It does not seem to be in Doctrine and Covenants 132:19–20 either. Is Robinson participating in the speculation that he tries to avoid?

The third point is correct. KFD says that after Jesus (and we ourselves) take the throne of eternal power, “[God, the Father] will then take a higher exaltation, and [Jesus] will take his place, and thereby become exalted [himself].”51 Clearly, our progression to Godhood will never allow us to “catch up” to God the Father in power. Of course, the claim of subordination to the Father’s glory here seems to imply the doctrine of eternal progression, which in turn implies that God can progress further in glory. Moreover, since the KFD clearly implies that in the future we can become as God is now, this claim of eternal subordination implies that God will progress beyond where he is now, i.e., God is surpassable (at least by himself).

The fourth item on the list is a strange claim for Robinson to make. It seems that Robinson usually does not like the influence of Greek philosophy on traditional theology. But here he points out that the kind of gods that we would become would not count as gods according to the Greek conception. This is probably right, if by ‘Greek conception of God’ he means something like the unmoved mover of Aristotle, or the Form of the Good for Plato.

50 Ibid., 346.  
51 Ibid., 348.
But, of course, the traditional Christian God is neither of these things either. It is also true that we cannot be gods in the sense of the traditional Christian God, if by that Robinson means something like the Anselmian notion of God. But this seems hardly relevant, since by LDS lights God the Father is not a God on the Anselmian notion of God.

Surely in one sense it is true to say that the Gods that we can become will remain contingent. For a state of affairs is contingent just in case it could have failed to exist. And the state of affairs of our attaining Godhood could surely have failed to exist. However, there is another sense of contingency in which \( x \) is said to be contingent just in case there is a \( y \) upon which \( x \)’s existence depends. If this is what Robinson means by saying that we will be contingent, then he is wrong. As we have already seen, Joseph says in the KFD, “We say that God himself is a self-existent being. . . . Man does exist upon the same principles.” Clearly, ‘self-existent’ is most plausibly read as implying that his existence does not depend on anything else. Given this definition of ‘contingent’, it follows that we are not contingent.

That Robinson is committed to the sixth claim is implied by his reason for believing the fourth. We cannot become Gods in the Greek sense (whatever that is) since we cannot be the ground of all being. But certainly God the Father is also not the ground of all being. Indeed, to say that \( S \) is the ground of all being is to say that everything that exists depends ontologically on \( S \)’s existence. And again the KFD claims that this is false. There it is quite clear that Joseph is denying ex nihilo creation, affirming the independent existence of matter and the independent existence of our intelligence (or the fundamental part of us that makes us who we are). These claims are also affirmed in Doctrine and Covenants 93 and 131.

So, it might be fair to say that the divide is as wide here as one might expect it to be, and not as narrow as Robinson claims. However, Robinson does commit himself to a doctrine of deification that is at least as strong as that advocated by Greek Orthodox theology, and it is this doctrine that Owen and Mosser criticize.

---

53 Smith, “King Follett Discourse,” 352.
Note that if they are right to criticize a very minimal version of deification, then their arguments will probably apply to a more pronounced version, *a fortiori*.

The first argument that Owen and Mosser offer against the doctrine of deification is that advocates of such a doctrine tend to confuse justification with sanctification. Apparently the idea is that the doctrine of deification essentially claims that salvation is becoming like God. And so, since the forgiveness of sins is part of salvation, justification is brought about merely by this becoming as God is. However, this practically identifies justification (being forgiven or acquitted of sin) and sanctification (becoming holy). From an evangelical perspective this identification is wrong. For one thing, it tends to lead to the view that justification requires works and is not by grace alone. This is a point that Owen and Mosser take up later.

Of course, this argument is not really an argument that is supposed to convince Latter-day Saints or Greek Orthodox that the doctrine of deification is wrong. It is more an argument that is supposed to convince someone who is evangelical that the doctrine of deification is unacceptable. The argument serves to show where a difference lies, but we can hardly see that it shows where a superiority lies. Indeed, who is to say that justification and sanctification are not very closely related in the way Latter-day Saints, Catholics, and Orthodox believers say they are? Owen and Mosser might cite Paul in answer to this question. But then we have the old debate about which soteriology is best supported by the New Testament as a whole, and we’ll leave that to a bit later.

Robinson argues that “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” (HWD, 82). Owen and Mosser respond by pointing out that the passages that Robinson cites in defense of our divine heritage will only be convincing to those who come to the Old Testament with the assumption of divine paternity already in hand (see O&M, 42). This may be right. The *tu quoque* reply is that the same applies to the claim that such passages are meant only to be figurative. But a Latter-day Saint may also argue that the presumption is in favor of the literal interpretation of such passages. After all, in prose there is always an assumption that
what is stated is to be taken literally *unless there is an indicator otherwise*. Owen and Mosser owe us more than the claim that such passages could be interpreted figuratively; they need to argue that such passages should be interpreted figuratively.

They do try to give us such an argument by appealing to Genesis 2:7 NIV: “God formed the man from the dust.” Supposedly, this implies that there is an ontological chasm between God and man.

It should be clear that the mere fact that God formed man out of the dust of the earth does not imply that man is not the same kind of being as God, i.e., on an ontological continuum with God. Such a claim would assume that nothing can make others of its own kind. And procreation (not to mention cloning!) shows this assumption to be patently false.

However, they may be claiming more narrowly that anything that is created cannot be like God in the sense of being self-existent and uncreated. This appears to be a necessary truth. However, the critical question is exactly what God created out of the dust of the ground. Presumably, only man’s body. We don’t believe that Owen and Mosser would affirm that man’s spirit was created out of dust. And it is man’s spirit that Joseph said is co-eternal with God, uncreated, and self-existent. Thus, for the reasons given, it does not appear that Genesis 2:7 is in any way inconsistent with the Mormon doctrine of deification.

**Trinity**

Robinson rightly expresses Mormon belief about the Godhead in the following way: “We believe that the oneness of these three is not an ontological oneness of being . . . , but a oneness of mind, purpose, power and intent” (HWD, 129). By this view, Latter-day Saints affirm what Owen and Mosser call the “economic trinity” and deny what they call the “ontological trinity.” Owen and Mosser argue that there is scriptural evidence for the ontological oneness of God, and they fault Latter-day Saints for denying this aspect of Christian orthodoxy.

Clearly, as Owen and Mosser point out (see O&M, 45), the Hebrew tradition was monotheistic: “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one” (Deuteronomy 6:4 NIV). Clearly referring
to this Old Testament claim, however, Paul makes the radical remark “For us there is but one God, the Father . . . and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ.” It seems that he is saying that there is one God and then there is also one Lord (where both God and Lord are divine titles). No wonder Jews and Muslims accuse Christians of compromising monotheism. Of course, claims like that found in Deuteronomy 6:4 and in Paul are together the reason for classic Trinitarianism. Indeed, if you assume an ontological interpretation of Deuteronomy 6:4 then Trinitarianism (or something like it) seems the only way to reconcile monist claims about God with the pluralist claims about divine persons. But why should one make such assumptions? Paul seems to be saying that God is a designator of the Father. And clearly since there is but one Father, there is but one God in this sense. Why should we make the assumption that Paul must mean here that God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ are the same being or substance?

Owen and Mosser give a theological argument that the Son must be the same Deity as the Father (if not the same person): “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” (O&M, 49). This raises several issues. First is the issue about whether Latter-day Saints affirm that the Son is a lesser or independent Deity. And we will take this up shortly. Second, the reasoning seems spurious. Owen and Mosser’s claim is of the form ‘if not-\(p\) then not-\(q\)’, where \(p\) = ‘the Son is identical with the divine essence’ and \(q\) = ‘the Son can bring about reconciliation with God’. This claim is true only ‘if \(q\) is true (as we suppose it is) then \(p\) must be true’. So, if the Son brings about reconciliation with God, then he must be identical with the divine essence. What would make such a conditional true? We don’t know what Owen and Mosser have in mind. However, the general claim

\((R)\) Reconciliation with some entity can only be effected by that entity.

would do the trick. But clearly this claim is false. Third parties are often brought in to help reconcile differences between two parties. Sometimes third parties are essential to such reconciliation. Maybe something weaker than (R) is supposed to do the trick:
(R*) Reconciliation with a deity can only be effected by that deity.

Now it is true that reconciliation with S requires that S accept the reconciliation, but that does not imply that someone other than S cannot be involved in effecting the reconciliation. And we can hardly see why this would be any different with persons who are God.

The first issue raised by Owen and Mosser's comment has to do with whether Latter-day Saints think that the Son is an independent or lesser deity. Now one issue in the background here is whether Latter-day Saints can call their doctrine Social Trinitarian or whether they must settle for the heretical Tritheism. We don’t think that the LDS doctrine of the Godhead fits very well into traditional theological categories, and so we will point out where it is similar to Social Trinitarianism and then perhaps where it is not. According to Cornelius Plantinga, Social Trinitarianism is committed to at least three claims: (1) "The theory must have Father, Son, and Spirit as distinct centers of knowledge, will, love, and action, . . . [and thus] as distinct centers of consciousness or, in short, as persons in some full sense of that term"; (2) divine simplicity must not conflict with point number 1; and (3) Father, Son, and Spirit are one social unit, and this is the fundamental sense in which they are one. Now this clearly sounds like LDS theology. Given this definition of Social Trinitarianism, we are certainly Social Trinitarians.

Plantinga goes on further to claim that there are three senses in which there is one God. There is the sense in which ‘God’ refers to the Father. There is the sense in which ‘God’ refers to the divine essence that all three divine persons share. And there is the sense in which ‘God’ refers to the social unit of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Here, the only sense in which the Son (or the Spirit) is God is the sense in which the Son has the divine essence—that is, exemplifies the properties severally necessary and

---

54 Blake Ostler, in “Bridging the Gulf,” a review of How Wide the Divide? in this volume, pp. 162–63, argues for a Social Trinitarian understanding of the LDS concept of God.

jointly sufficient for divinity. And in this sense, the term ‘God’ is being used as a predicate adjective. Do Latter-day Saints use the term in a stronger sense, for example, as a predicate nominative? Well, we have already seen that Joseph used the predicate nominative sense in describing what we will become.\(^{56}\) An individual human can become \textit{a God} (predicate nominative). It would be odd to say that Jesus is not also \textit{a} God. But once we have admitted this it seems that we are departing from Plantinga’s version of Social Trinitarianism. Indeed, once we say that God the Father is \textit{a} God, Jesus is \textit{a} God, and the Spirit is \textit{a} God (and not merely the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Spirit is God), then we have the \textit{logical} implication that there are three Gods. Of course, there is still only one God in the sense that there is only one Father; there is only one God in the sense that there is one social unit that is the Godhead; and there is only one God in the sense that there is one divine essence. Whether this counts as Tritheism probably depends on how you look at it—that is, whether there is one or three Gods is a matter of what you take to be the sense of ‘God’.

Moreover, it should be clear also from the King Follett Discourse that, since God the Father takes a “higher” exaltation than Jesus, and Jesus progresses to God the Father’s current level of exaltation, Jesus’ status is (at one time at least) in some sense lower than God the Father’s.\(^{57}\) This might seem to be something akin to Arianism. However, it also might be the case that Godhood is something that one achieves once one has passed a certain level of development. And then one can continue to surpass oneself once one has passed this level but in a way that does not make one any more divine than before. The Son may have achieved this level of progression before this life and is thus fully God while he is Jesus—and he is fully God even though he can progress to take the place that God the Father once held. Cornelius Plantinga points to ontological subordinationism as an indicator of the Tritheistic heresy.\(^{58}\) Owen and Mosser emphasize that LDS theology falls prey to this heresy. Clearly, there is some sort of subordinationism here in the Son’s relationship to the Father, but it is

\(^{56}\) See Smith, “King Follett Discourse,” 347.  
\(^{57}\) See ibid., 347-48.  
\(^{58}\) See C. Plantinga, “Social Trinity and Tritheism,” 34.
not clear that Latter-day Saints must accept an ontological subordinationism as Owen and Mosser suggest. But we must reemphasize the difficulty in trying to force LDS theology into the categories set up to deal with traditional Christian theology. We doubt this can be done without doing damage to the LDS view, and so we prefer merely to state the view without attaching a traditional label to it.

The Social Trinitarian idea that there is just one divine social unit whom we worship and to whom we are accountable is very central to LDS thought. Owen and Mosser argue that such an understanding of the Godhead would not reconcile the reality of the incarnation and the atonement with the monotheism of the Old Testament. Now clearly the LDS view can say that the Son is a God, and so the reality of the incarnation and atonement is preserved. The question is whether the monotheism of the Old Testament is preserved. If it is assumed that the monotheism of the Old Testament is a metaphysical thesis, then surely Owen and Mosser are right. But why should we assume it is a metaphysical thesis? After all, the monotheism of the Old Testament is most often stated in contexts where there is a danger of worshiping false gods. It was important to emphasize to these people that you could not be of two minds in worship—you could not hedge your bets by following various religious traditions. Either you worshiped the true God and Lord or you did not, and there was only one way to do so. Socially there really is no difference between a state that is ruled by one king and one that is ruled by three who desire the same thing and never disagree in how to accomplish their desires. "One divine monarchy does not entail just one divine monarch."59 LDS theology is socially monotheistic, and we don’t see any reason to think that such a view is not consonant with the Old Testament as a whole.

Another theological objection to the LDS theology of the Godhead is that it does not account for fact that the Son’s atonement is infinite.60 But in what respect is it infinite? Is it infinite in the sense that it pays for an infinite number of sins in infinite time? Is it infinite in the amount of suffering that would be en-

---

59 Ibid., 30.
60 Alma 34:10 clearly commits Latter-day Saints to the claim that the atonement is infinite in some respect.
tailed by undergoing the event on the cross (or, as Latter-day Saints believe, in Gethsemane)? Getting clear about the way in which Christ’s atonement is infinite is necessary if we are to deal meaningfully with the problem Owen and Mosser pose. For indeed, beings that are finite in some respects might be infinite in others. For example, it is perfectly possible for a material object to have always existed and to always continue to exist. But then such an object is infinite in the amount of time it exists. We can also imagine beings who are limited by physical space, but who can contemplate an infinite number of mathematical truths. Who is to say that the Son’s divinity is not infinite in precisely that dimension in which it would be necessary for him to make an infinite payment? Some Latter-day Saints believe that the dimension in which the Son’s atonement is infinite is in its application to persons. That is, there is no limit as to who can benefit from the atonement. Indeed, this seems to be the import of our third Article of Faith: “We believe that through the atonement of Christ all mankind may be saved.” If this is so, the claim that Christ’s atonement is infinite is best understood as a denial of one of Calvin’s five theses—i.e., the thesis of limited atonement.

The theological error committed by Latter-day Saints, according to Owen and Mosser, is that we place the fount of divinity in the person of God and not in his being (see O&M, 52). However, it seems to us that the error is in going the other way. Placing the font of divinity in the being of God rather than in his person is to distance the divinity of God from his personality. What seems to be implied is that God is not really a person, but instead there are persons whose underlying being is God. Indeed, the Father is a

61 We are also suspicious of the entire Anselmian theory of the atonement, which claims that it is a vicarious payment for sins. It is just not clear that an innocent person can justly pay for the sins of the guilty. Anselm uses the metaphor of paying off one’s debt. Here penal substitution is allowed, but debt payment is an exception rather than a rule. And even if the payment model of the atonement is unproblematic, it is not at all clear why we should think that this payment must be infinite. Do mortals commit an infinite number of sins? Surely there are only a finite number of things that one person can do, and surely there are only a finite number of mortals. So, it would seem that we cannot commit an infinite number of sins. Perhaps the price for our sins is infinite even though our sins are themselves only finite in number. But then this would hardly seem to satisfy any retributivist (even lex talionis) theory of just punishment.
person and the Father is God, but not in the same respect. This is not modalism, but it is just as pernicious to the believer who would like to relate to his God. The LDS view of the Godhead, on the other hand, asserts that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are Gods, not just in their substance (i.e., some abstract divine essence that they share) but in their personhood. They are Gods in the same sense that a man might be a king: it is a person that is a God just as it can be a person that is a king. And so when we pray to God we are praying to an individual person and not some abstract divine essence. The LDS view of God is one to which the layman can relate. Despite all the insistence that the traditional concept of God is personal, we have a hard time seeing that this is more than just a metaphor. For it certainly cannot mean the same thing as it means when we say that Harry or Sally is a person.62

Finally, the doctrine of Trinity is very philosophically problematic (except in the Social Trinitarianism form congenial to LDS theism, but rejected by Owen and Mosser). It is important for Latter-day Saints to see that the appearance of philosophical incoherence in this doctrine is prima facie evidence against it, as well. Indeed, at least, the traditional doctrine of the Trinity makes the following claims:

1. The Father is God.
2. The Son is God.
3. The Holy Spirit is God.
4. The Father is not the Son.
5. The Father is not the Holy Spirit.
6. The Son is not the Holy Spirit.
7. There is exactly one God.63

Suppose we take the ‘is’ here to be the ‘is’ of identity. Then we have got a problem with the first six claims alone (not to mention the seventh). Any beginning logic student can derive the contradiction. So, the ‘is’ here must not be an ‘is’ of identity. But

---

62 Indeed, Aquinas recognizes this and claims that personality is attributed to God only analogically and not literally. See *Summa Theologica* 1a.13.7 and *Summa contra Gentiles* 1.34.

63 These seven claims are taken verbatim from Richard Cartwright’s insightful essay, “On the Logical Problem of the Trinity,” in *Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), 188. Moreover, the arguments we make are adapted from his essay, pages 187–200.
it seems that claims 4–6 require the ‘is’ of identity and claims 1–3 seem to be more along the lines of an ‘is’ of predication. So, the first claim really says “The Father is a God” and the fourth, “The Father is not identical with the Son,” and so on for the rest. But then claims 1–3 clearly imply that there are three Gods, and this is a denial of 7. This is not the place for an extensive critique of the traditional concept of the Trinity. Suffice it to say that there is a problem here that is not easily solved.

Salvation

Soteriology and Anthropology

We think that Owen and Mosser, to their credit, have correctly summarized Robinson’s soteriological position. And they are surely right to point out the similarity between Arminianism and Robinson’s soteriology. Owen and Mosser really do not have much to say in the way of criticism of Robinson’s soteriology per se. Instead, their criticisms apply to what they call his anthropology (see O&M, 70–72). We will take this issue up now.

Although Owen and Mosser are in considerable agreement with Robinson on soteriology (given his Arminianism), they do not accept his anthropology, since it is “semi-Pelagian” (see O&M, 70–72). Needless to say, we think that Robinson’s anthropology is correct. The central point of concern (or contention) is whether man can respond to God without prevenient grace, i.e., act righteously of his own accord. Robinson claims that free will is a part of man’s nature and is preserved from the effects of the fall by Christ’s atonement. So, we can make good choices on our own and this ability is preserved by the atonement. Owen and Mosser are right to point out that this is a semi-Pelagian view. But they are wrong, it seems, to claim that it is inconsistent with scripture. They do not explain exactly how each scripture they cite is

---

64 We are wary of Robinson’s claim that Christ’s merits alone make us eligible for salvation. It is a traditional view in the LDS community that Christ’s efforts are combined with our own. And our own efforts do make a difference. But for the purpose of this reply we will not challenge Robinson’s view.

65 They also point out that it is inconsistent with a statement from the Council of Orange (see O&M, 72). Here they are right, but we don’t see that the point does not beg the question.
supposed to contradict the view that man has free will independent of God’s grace, so we can only surmise. We will take a couple of examples and show how what the scripture says is consistent with the LDS view.

One example is Acts 16:14, in which it is said that the Lord opened the heart of a certain woman of Lydia. This implies that God can open people’s hearts. But notice that it does not imply that this change was not a result of some initiative on her part. Furthermore, even if we suppose that this change of heart was not the result of her initiative (this seems like theological determinism), we might say that her heart had been hardened and she lost what was once the ability to act freely. God’s grace gave her this ability again. In other words, if it is the case that people can squander their natural ability to choose by constantly choosing the wrong, then it could also be the case that God might need to intervene to return this gift.

Another example is Romans 9:15–16: “For he saith to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy.” This example seems to be clearly consistent with LDS soteriology and anthropology. It might seem that this scripture is saying that we can do no willing of the good on our own. But this is not the only reading. Indeed, we might say that the scripture says that any willing of the good on our own part will not be sufficient for salvation, and so God must make up by his mercy for what we cannot do by ourselves.

A more difficult example is 1 Corinthians 15:10: “By the grace of God I am what I am.” This seems to imply that our nature is determined by God. But of course this is a two-edged sword. Such theological determinism would seem to imply also that it is God’s responsibility when someone is unrighteous. We need a more sophisticated interpretation of such a passage. Paul was a bad person before his transforming experience on the road to Damascus. That we have, by nature, an ability to choose right from wrong does not preclude that we can’t choose to become bad characters, as Paul did. And once this choice is made, then it is required that God help us to change this character. We must be willing to allow God to change our hearts for such a change to
occur, but God does the work. This does not imply that we could not have chosen to do the right from the outset.

Certainly after centuries of anti-Pelagian interpretation of the scriptures, it might seem more natural to interpret such passages in an orthodox (Calvinist or Arminian) way. But this is not to say that the scriptures do not bear out a semi-Pelagian interpretation. Of course, to show this definitively would take much more work than can be done in a short article.

Postmortem Salvation

Another unorthodox feature of LDS soteriology is the idea of postmortem salvation. Owen and Mosser recognize what they call "the emotive attractiveness" of the doctrine (O&M, 76). However, this is clearly to understate its attractiveness. This doctrine is not just attractive because it satisfies some emotional desire. Rather it is attractive because it solves a theological dilemma that would remain unresolved otherwise. Supposedly God is perfectly just. Moreover, salvation is acquired only through knowledge of the gospel (faith, repentance, baptism, and the gift of the Holy Ghost). However, many people have died without the chance to hear about the gospel, much less the ability to respond to it. Relatively speaking, that portion of the world throughout history that has heard the gospel is small. These ignorant people will not be saved. It is not just for someone to punish people for failure to respond to something to which they never had the chance to respond. So, since God punishes these ignorant people, he is not just. Something must give. Postmortem salvation in LDS theology claims that every person will have an equal chance to respond to the gospel in this life or the next. Justice is preserved. So, the attractiveness of the doctrine is much more than emotive, it is logical.

Of course, the mere fact that a theological doctrine resolves a dilemma is not reason to think that it is true (unless, perhaps, there is no other resolution). But LDS theology is not committed to such a doctrine on the basis of reason alone. Surely modern revelation is the source of this doctrine. Robinson attempts to show that the doctrine has basis in ancient revelation. And a growing

---

66 Here we could interpret the heart as a first-order desire and our willingness to change our heart as a second-order desire.
number of non-LDS Christians (including evangelicals) are beginning to reach the same conclusion. But even if it doesn’t (as Owen and Mosser presumably believe), it is not contradicted by ancient revelation and so we Latter-day Saints can (and should) interpret ancient revelation in light of modern revelation. So even if ancient scripture is most naturally interpreted so as to say nothing about postmortem salvation (contra Robinson), this assumption should not move us since as Latter-day Saints we are not committed to the claim that ancient scripture contains everything essential to salvation.

With that said we may still say something about Owen and Mosser’s scripture-based argument(s). They give the example of Dives, Lazarus, and Abraham. Dives is in Hades and the others in paradise. Dives calls out to the others, wanting them to bring him water. Abraham says that the chasm is fixed and he cannot cross over. Owen and Mosser claim that this entails that once you are dead your fate is fixed. But notice that this reasoning applies only if we suppose that Dives did not have an opportunity to respond positively to the gospel in his life. Otherwise, we might say that Dives’s fate was fixed because of his lack of response to the gospel in his life. Realizing that he can no longer save himself Dives wants Lazarus to return and call his brothers to repentance. Abraham says that if they wouldn’t respond to the scriptures then they wouldn’t respond to someone who has risen from the dead. Owen and Mosser claim that this again shows that this life is the only chance. But it seems to us that this part of the story, rather, makes the point that the unfaithful won’t be converted by miracles. Certainly, Dives’s brothers are still alive and so, on Owen and Mosser’s theory, could still respond to the gospel. Moreover, Latter-day Saints could argue that there is a very real sense in which the chasm between those in hell and in Abraham’s bosom

67 Among these most notably is the prominent evangelical philosopher Stephen T. Davis. See his “Universalism, Hell and the Fate of the Ignorant,” Modern Theology 6 (January 1990): 173–86. See also Gabriel Faec, “Divine Perseverance,” in What About Those Who Have Never Heard, ed. John Sanders (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1995, 71–106. Other evangelicals holding this view include Donald Bloesch, George Lindbeck, and George MacDonald.

68 Indeed, Latter-day Saints claim that those who will have an opportunity to respond to the gospel in the next life are those who did not have a chance in this life.
cannot be crossed at the time at which Dives finds himself there, but that with the atonement and Christ’s visit to the postmortal spirit world that chasm is bridged. We could cite various biblical passages in support of this interpretation (e.g., see Isaiah 24:22; 49:9; Luke 4:18; and John 5:25).

Ironically, Owen and Mosser cite Book of Mormon passages that appear to be problematic for the doctrine of postmortem salvation (see O&M, 78 n. 185). The first passage they cite is Alma 12:24: “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.” They say that “there simply is no room for Robinson’s theology in this passage” (O&M, 78 n. 185). The passage does seem to equate “a space granted” with “this life.” And so it might seem that it is only this life in which we can repent. But really all that follows is that this life is one space that is granted for repentance and not that it is the only space that is granted for repentance.

Owen and Mosser claim that Alma 34:32–34 more strongly precludes the possibility of postmortem salvation. It says, “This life is the time for men to prepare to meet God.... 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 eternity, 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.” This does seem to imply that if we don’t repent in this life then we never will. And so there must be no postmortem salvation. However, this is not the only way to read the passage. The next verse says why we won’t repent in the next life if we don’t in this life: “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.” This seems to imply clearly that it is not because we are not given an opportunity to repent in the next life that we cannot do so, but only because we have the same dispositions in the next life as we do in this life. Indeed, this implies that we will have the opportunity to repent but will forsake it because of our dispositions. This makes perfect sense. And this is quite harmonious with the
practice of vicarious work for the dead since if some people did not have the opportunity to repent in this life then their dispositions might be such that they will do so in the next life. For those of us who have had plenty of opportunity to repent in this life but have failed to do so, we will be very unlikely to change our minds.

Conclusion

Owen and Mosser have two general goals in their review of *How Wide the Divide?* One is to show that the divide, even if it is not as wide as we may have thought, is deep and profound. The other is to elaborate on what they take to be problems with LDS theology. Their review is an important contribution to a continued theological dialogue between Latter-day Saints and evangelicals. What is even more significant is that their recognition that the divide is either wider or deeper than Robinson and Blomberg admit does not deter in any way their willingness to engage Latter-day Saints in a friendly and open dialogue. Indeed, the distance between our respective theologies should have nothing to do with the extent to which we show each other Christlike charity. Nevertheless, we do believe that there are significant theological differences and that these differences are not merely academic but have an effect on the very nature and possibility of our salvation. Since Owen and Mosser conclude by identifying where LDS beliefs remain “unacceptably outside the boundaries of Christian orthodoxy” (O&M, 81), it may be useful for us to set out several points where evangelicals are unfortunately outside the boundaries of modern revelation: (1) a theologically unacceptable form of theistic absolutism which holds that God is the ground of all being and thus apparently ultimately responsible for all the evil that occurs; (2) an acceptance of the traditional doctrine of the Trinity in which the Father and the Son, although separate persons, are the same substance; (3) a denial of the ability inherent in each individual to choose between right and wrong without prevenient grace; (4) an acceptance of the claim that those who do not have a chance to receive the gospel in this life will nevertheless be damned in the next. Opposing these evangelical tenets are the LDS doctrines revealed to Joseph Smith about the nature of God,
the importance of free agency, and vicarious work for the dead. Indeed, it is our commitment to modern revelation and the evangelical rejection of it that provides the respective epistemological bases for our differing theological views. And so it seems our whole debate could turn on this one point.

This rejoinder agrees with Owen and Mosser that even if the divide is not as wide as we might have expected, the chasm is deep in certain fundamental ways. Moreover, we have attempted to respond to the criticisms of those LDS doctrines with which Owen and Mosser are in disagreement. We have also suggested that the evangelical doctrines themselves suffer from certain notorious philosophical difficulties not encountered by LDS theology. We believe that both reason and revelation support the LDS position. Clearly, Owen and Mosser believe similarly about their position. Nevertheless, even if none of us is persuaded by the other’s arguments, the interchange helps to enlighten our minds as to the nature of our own beliefs and commitments. Our own formulations of our beliefs have been sharpened and altered by engaging in this discussion. LDS theology is young and unencumbered. Evangelicals have been pondering their theological doctrines for centuries. We can surely learn from them, just as we think they can learn from modern revelation. We agree with B. H. Roberts when he says:

It requires striving—intellectual and spiritual—to comprehend the things of God—even the revealed things of God. . . .

Mental laziness is the vice of men, especially with reference to divine things. Men seem to think that because inspiration and revelation are factors in connection with the things of God, therefore the pain and stress of mental effort are not required.69

Although we believe revelation is the starting and ending point of the search for religious truth, critical thought is essential along the way to understanding. Robinson and Blomberg have started us down a path of critical discussion that can only help us to better

comprehend our respective traditions and to respect those of others. We hope this path will be well traveled.