Editor’s Introduction: American Apocrypha?

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Abstract

Introduction to the current issue, including editor’s picks. Peterson surmises what the assumptions of the forthcoming book *American Apocrypha* will be. The statements of the Book of Mormon witnesses must be taken seriously, and the work of Royal Skousen reveals a stunningly consistent, systematic, and complex book. Keith Norman’s dissertation on deification and Jordan Vajda’s master’s thesis on divinization note parallels with early doctrines of theosis. Joseph Smith’s mission consisted of making clear that which was formerly hidden.
American Apocrypha?

A forthcoming collection of essays about the Book of Mormon, the publisher’s announcement says, will bear the title *American Apocrypha*. What is the point of that title? We’ll know better when the book appears, of course, but its authors are unlikely to contend that the Book of Mormon is among “those books of the Old Testament that were not accepted by Jews as part of the Hebrew Scriptures and were excluded from the Protestant Bible at the Reformation.” That is the first of the two definitions occurring under *apocrypha* in the *Oxford American Dictionary*, and it requires a capital A. Knowing something of the predilections of the collection’s two editors, I’m reasonably confident that something like the second definition (of uncapitalized *apocrypha*) is closer to their view: “any writings of dubious authenticity.” Under *apocryphal*, the *Oxford American Dictionary* lists “of the Apocrypha” only as a secondary definition; the primary definition is “untrue, invented.”

There are those who wish to contend that Joseph Smith just “made it up,” that Mormonism is merely a rather haphazard pastiche of American frontier nostrums, a bit of folk magic, and a few half-understood chunks of popular theology created by a rough-hewn but gifted Yankee bumpkin on the basis of some combination or other of ethical deficiency and a pathological personality. It seems to me that they face an increasingly difficult task.

As always, I think that the testimony of the Witnesses to the Book of Mormon gets very much in the way of such explanations—and
that it was designed to do so. Most recently, the massive and painstaking study of the text of the Book of Mormon conducted by Royal Skousen, whose work has finally begun to appear in definitive print, reveals (at least for those with eyes to see) a stunningly consistent, systematic, and complex book that seems as far as conceivably possible from the undisciplined ravings of a frontier pseudoprophet.

I consider Professor Skousen’s project one of the most remarkable scholarly efforts ever undertaken with regard to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and I am proud that the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies has been associated with it from its beginning. Another item whose recent publication by FARMS has pleased me a great deal is Keith Norman’s 1980 Duke University doctoral dissertation, which now stands as the opening volume in our Occasional Papers series. In this essay, Norman demonstrates that “The doctrine that man’s ultimate destiny and fulfillment is to become like God forms the heart of Christianity for Athanasius.”

That is a stunning idea. Why? Because Athanasius, the fourth-century church father and bishop of Alexandria, was a crucial figure in the process that culminated in the formation of the mainstream Christian doctrine of the Trinity—and because it can be shown that Athanasius’s belief in salvation as human deification was fundamental to his efforts in and around the epochal Council of Nicaea that

1. See particularly Richard Lloyd Anderson, Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981); see also Lyndon W. Cook, ed., David Whitmer Interviews: A Restoration Witness (Orem, Utah: Grandin Book, 1991). Professor Anderson and Scott Faulring have been working for years on collecting and eventually publishing the papers of Oliver Cowdery and other Witnesses. When this material appears, from what I know of it, it will solidify and confirm the respectability of the Witnesses and (much more importantly) the reliability of their testimonies.

2. See Royal Skousen, ed., The Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2001); Royal Skousen, ed., The Printer’s Manuscript of the Book of Mormon, 2 parts (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2001). Two further volumes are scheduled to appear, which will reflect on the results of intensive study of the textual history of the Book of Mormon.


4. Ibid., 31.
first formulated the Nicene Creed. In other words, the basis for the
doctrine that lies at the foundation of developed "orthodox" Chris­
tian theology—the Trinity—is the concept of human deification, a
concept essentially forgotten by both Catholics and their Protestant
derivatives in Western Christendom.

I've just finished reading a remarkable 1998 master's thesis,
"'Partakers of the Divine Nature': A Comparative Analysis of Patristic
and Mormon Doctrines of Divinization," written at the Graduate
Theological Union in Berkeley by one Jordan Vajda, OP, a Domini­
can Catholic priest ("OP" stands for "Ordo Praedicatorum"—"Order
of Preachers"—the official title of the Dominican order).

Perhaps surprisingly, while he finds some differences between the
Latter-day Saint view and that found in patristic literature, Father
Vajda is quite positive toward the position articulated by Joseph
Smith. I actually think that one of the two major differences he finds—
contrast ing the ontological unity of the orthodox Trinity with the
moral unity of the Latter-day Saint Godhead—constitutes substan­
tially less of a gulf than he may believe. This isn't his fault, though:
We have not expressed ourselves as clearly as we ought to have. Ours
is not a very sophisticated theological tradition. I suspect, however,
that the oneness of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and, ultimately, of
the exalted Saints with them—is richer and deeper even than the
perfect unity of purpose that Latter-day Saints typically, and correctly,
ascr ibe to the Godhead. And with the increasing acceptance of the
doctrine of "social trinitarianism," at least some revisionist circles in
mainstream Christianity may be moving in a direction more conge­
nial to the teachings of the modern prophets and apostles of the re­s­
stored church. The other difference between what Father Vajda, for
the sake of convenience, refers to as the Latter-day Saint doctrine of
"exaltation" and the patristic doctrine of theosis is genuine and more
fundamental. (Indeed, the first difference, to the extent that it exists

5. I'm grateful to my coworker Kristian Heal for bringing the thesis to my attention.
6. Someone (any takers?) should write an orientation to social trinitarianism for a
scholarly or interested lay Latter-day Saint audience. The rise of social trinitarianism is an
extremely interesting and, from my viewpoint, healthy phenomenon.
at all, might actually be reducible to the second.) It involves the church fathers’ concept of creation *ex nihilo*—the very concept that Keith Norman sees as creating a fundamental inconsistency and tension in Athanasius’s view, and a concept which, most modern scholars now concur, is relatively late and wholly nonbiblical.⁷

“Members of the LDS Church,” Father Vajda promises near the beginning of his thesis,

will discover unmistakable evidence that their fundamental belief about human salvation and potential is not unique or a Mormon invention. Latin Catholics and Protestants will learn of a doctrine of salvation that, while relatively foreign to their ears, is nevertheless part of the heritage of the undivided Catholic Church of the first millennium. Members of Eastern Orthodox and Eastern Catholic Churches will discover on the American continent an amazing parallel to their own belief that salvation in Christ involves our becoming “partakers of the divine nature.”⁸

In his concluding paragraph, alluding to the inflammatory and sensationalistic anti-Mormon propaganda film created by the lamentable Ed Decker in the early 1980s, Father Vajda observes that

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the Mormons are truly "godmakers": as the [LDS] doctrine of exaltation explains, the fullness of human salvation means "becoming a god." Yet what was meant to be a term of ridicule has turned out to be a term of approbation, for the witness of the Greek Fathers of the Church... is that they also believed that salvation meant "becoming a god." It seems that if one's soteriology cannot accommodate a doctrine of human divinization, then it has at least implicitly, if not explicitly, rejected the heritage of the early Christian church and departed from the faith of first millennium Christianity. However, if that is the case, those who would espouse such a soteriology also believe, in fact, that Christianity, from about the second century on, has apostatized and "gotten it wrong" on this core issue of human salvation. Thus, ironically, those who would excoriate Mormons for believing in the doctrine of exaltation actually agree with them that the early church experienced a "great apostasy" on fundamental doctrinal questions. And the supreme irony is that such persons should probably investigate the claims of the LDS Church, which proclaims that within itself is to be found the "restoration of all things."9

Rather striking words, especially coming as they do from a Dominican priest. The presence on North American soil of this "amazing parallel" to ancient and Eastern Christian belief does indeed demand a response from anti-Mormon critics rather more substantial and serious than their usual cry that it represents unchristian and unbiblical blasphemy. Such claims simply will not withstand informed scrutiny.

The parallels between early doctrines of theosis—which appear not only in the church fathers but, mutatis mutandis, in earlier Jewish sources—and the relevant doctrine of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are nothing short of stunning. As Roger Cook, who is pursuing important further research on this subject, points out, if

9. Ibid., 94–95.
it is appropriate to describe the Latter-day Saint concept of exaltation as the belief that the righteous can become gods, with the same power, holiness, glory, and righteousness that are manifested by the divine beings who surround God—that is, by the heavenly assembly or the council of the gods—then that concept is essentially an exact match with very ancient Judeo-Christian teachings. Since God and humankind are of the same species in both early Judeo-Christian thought and in the teaching of the Church of Jesus Christ, there is no ontological barrier to prevent men from becoming essentially like God.

Obviously, as Cook maintains, the implications are explosive. Reintegration of the ancient doctrine of theosis into Western Christendom would force a reexamination of many of the presuppositions held by mainstream Christians for many centuries. The doctrine challenges “orthodox” Christian soteriology, anthropology, and theology, and, if one wishes to remain faithful to the biblical texts interpreted in its light, demands a comprehensive revolution in Christian thought generally. Moreover, the burden of proof now appears to rest on those of the “orthodox” or “classical” Christian tradition to demonstrate why the position advanced by the modern prophets and apostles of the restoration is heretical, despite the extensive evidence according with it from ancient Jewish and Christian texts, to justify later “orthodoxy’s” rejection of so fundamentally important a belief, and to explain why that rejection should not be taken as stark evidence of apostasy from the teachings of the early church.


11. I summarize Roger Cook’s position here primarily from a post on the Zion’s Lighthouse Message Board (pub26.ezboard.com/bpacumenispages), reacting to Jordan Vajda’s master’s thesis.

12. The lack of such an ontological barrier is a major theme of Peterson, “‘Ye Are Gods.”

13. The interesting movement among some Protestant theologians called “Free Will theism”—another development which many Latter-day Saints would find both intensely interesting and congenial—is moving in the right direction but still has some distance to go before it will accord fully with ancient Judeo-Christian ideas on God and his nature.
I would go further still and say that the appearance of this "amazing parallel" to early Jewish and Christian thinking represents a very serious challenge—one of many—to those who would prefer to reduce Joseph Smith and his teachings to the early nineteenth-century environment as redacted by a creative psychopath or religious charlatan. Such an explanation, to my mind, simply isn’t capable of bearing the burden they wish to impose upon it.

Do Joseph Smith’s works represent “American apocrypha”? Not in the sense that his critics would use the words. But if we remember that the Greek apokryphos originally means “hidden,” and that it can be used both literally to refer to treasures and figuratively to describe hidden wisdom, I’m willing to grant that the term is precisely applicable. The opposite of apokryphos is phaneros, which signifies that which is “open,” “plain,” “visible,” “clear,” “known.” From the day he removed the plates of the Book of Mormon from their hiding place on the side of the Hill Cumorah, Joseph Smith’s mission consisted, to a very large extent, of making manifest that which had once been hidden. I am in awe of his achievement, and deeply grateful.

Editor’s Picks

As recent tradition dictates, I now recommend a pair of items treated in the present issue of the Review and, much less significantly, offer my own ratings. The pickings were somewhat slim this time. Most of what is discussed in the present issue simply cannot be recommended, except, perhaps, for use on camping trips. Nonetheless, I feel comfortable with our recommendations. What follows is the scale that I use in our rating system:

**** Outstanding, a seminal work of the kind that appears only rarely.
*** Enthusiastically recommended.
** Warmly recommended.
* Recommended.

Having established our scale, I now offer my unavoidably subjective ratings for the books that I feel we can recommend from the present issue of the FARMS Review of Books:
* Arvin S. Gibson, *Fingerprints of God*


I express my appreciation to those who have made this issue of the *Review* possible. Most of all, I’m grateful to the reviewers for their uncompensated work. I also wish to thank the indispensable Shirley Ricks, production editor since the beginning, and the inimitable Alison V. P. Coutts, director of publications for the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies and its new parent organization, the Brigham Young University Institute for the Study and Preservation of Ancient Religious Texts. Others who have lent their talents in the production of this issue include Angela D. Clyde, Tessa Hauglid, Paula W. Hicken, Shannon E. Murdock, and Linda Sheffield.