

## CONFERENCE ABSTRACTS

### 2012 SMPT, Utah State University

#### THURSDAY, 20 SEPTEMBER

##### 1. Philip Barlow, "Questions at the Veil"

Mormons and others allude to a "veil" that buffers our human awareness. The metaphor suggests an existential and epistemological barrier, but also a reality beyond it. Many Latter-day Saints accept this condition as an abstract necessity declared in the teaching of their founding prophet, but in actual living regard it essentially as an obstacle—one to be punctured whenever possible by revelation. The "veil" may be construed more positively, however, as a phenomenon with a purpose, a gauzy something with which I am in creative and useful tension, like the friction one minimizes when lubricating a car, but on which she depends when steering it. It is a question-inducing phenomenon, and we are by nature interrogative beings responding to an interrogative God.

##### 2. Joseph M. Spencer, "What Can We Do?: Reflections on 2 Nephi 25:23"

As every Latter-day Saint interested in talking about grace recognizes, Nephi's statement that we are "saved by grace, after all we can do" has to be explained. Attempts to do so have largely ignored both the exegetical and the theological context in which Nephi's statement appears. It is important to look at the immediate context of Nephi's statement—its connection with Nephi's larger project and his relative lack of interest in atonement theology, as well as its obvious relationship to a clearer theological statement made by Nephi's brother Jacob. It is still more crucial to destabilize the meaning of the text by paying intricately close attention to the actual words used by Nephi, as well as to position Nephi's claim within the larger theological setting of the Book of Mormon. These moves taken, Nephi's words appear to mean something rather distinct.

##### 3. David Bokovoy, "In Principio Creavit Deus: The Theological Use of Creation Imagery in the Book of Mormon"

*No abstract submitted*

##### 4. Steven L. Peck, "Death, the Fall, and Darwin: A More Harmonious Reading"

I will read 2 Nephi 2 and Alma 12 in a way that suggests evolution reigns in existence and is not only friendly to LDS Theology but required by it. I will explicitly explore

the Fall by considering Badiou's concept of an "event." I will then argue with Meillassoux that there are no absolutes. Fun times.

##### 5. Book Panel: *An Other Testament: On Typology*, by Joseph Spencer

This session will feature a discussion of various aspects of Joseph Spencer's book, *An Other Testament: On Typology*.

#### FRIDAY, 21 SEPTEMBER

##### 6. Daniel Graham, "Free Will in the Early Church"

In contrast with theories of predestination that dominated Christian theology from Augustine on, the early Church Fathers unanimously accepted free agency as a founding principle of Christianity. Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen all championed free will as the basis of moral responsibility, sin, repentance, and salvation. According to the early Church Fathers, free agency is had by God, angels, Adam and Eve in the garden, and it continued with Adam and Eve and their posterity after the Fall.

##### 7. Adam S. Miller, "Every Truth Is a Work, Every Object Is a Covenant"

The truthfulness of the Book of Mormon is a work to be done, not a fact in evidence. The book is more like a field to be plowed than a fruit to be eaten. You're not supposed to keep it on your nightstand with the other books you're not reading, you're supposed to tear out its pages, plant them in your yard, and see what grows. Bound by covenant, it is our work to make the Book of Mormon be true in as many ways and in as many worlds as we are able.

##### 8. Jordan Barrett, "The Eternality of God: Toward a Theological Interpretation of the Book of Mormon"

What is the relationship between the Book of Mormon and Mormon doctrine? With the recent emphasis on serious study of the Book of Mormon by Ezra Taft Benson and other LDS prophets, one might expect the relationship to be strong. But for example, how significant is the Book of Mormon's perspective on the eternality of God for Mormon theology? Does the Book of Mormon take precedence or play a primary role? And if it does not, then what does this mean? Using the eternality of God as a test

case, I argue for a theological reading of the Book of Mormon in which the text operates as an authoritative doctrinal guide and starting point for articulating what it means for God to be eternal. I conclude with some concerns and possible ways forward.

9. James McLachlan, “Mormonism, Idealism, and Romanticism”

Are Mormons monotheists? Polytheists? Panentheists? Pantheists? Do LDS views of God or Gods seem more like ancient Israelite henotheism? Perhaps “Kingship Monotheism” best fits the bill? Different Mormons, past and present, accept and prefer each of these labels and others. At times, I’ve been drawn to the label “Kathenotheism,” which Max Mueller used to describe Hindu total devotion to the God a believer was worshipping at that moment. In the devotion of love, one doesn’t weigh whether the object of devotion is the most powerful being in the universe, or the oldest—only that it is loved. I will explore this sensibility (via ideas presented by Jad Hatem at the 2008 SMPT conference) as a possible key for understanding the divine and human in the Book of Mormon. I think such a position allows for a smoother transition between the periods in LDS understanding regarding the character and relation of the human and divine between the Book of Mormon and the King Follet Discourse.

10. Janice Allred, “Opposition in All Things: The Book of Mormon View”

The Book of Mormon is an apocalyptic text, drawing a sharp distinction between good and evil. The concept of opposition in all things, introduced by Lehi early in the text, is often interpreted to mean that the opposition of good and evil is a necessary opposition. This paper argues that it is not. It offers an interpretation of the concept of opposition in all things and uses this paradigm to interpret the three oppositional pairs that ground all the teachings of the Book of Mormon: the way of life and the way of death, the church of Christ and the church of the devil, and Christ and Satan.

11. “‘What’s Ragged Should Be Left Ragged’: God’s Problem of Evil”

D.Z. Philips argues that the problem of evil results from philosophically confused notions of omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence being forced onto the existential question that virtually all people—religious and not—face: “Why this suffering?” By accepting the problem of evil, defenders of religion have done further damage by proposing theodicies that attempt to ultimately

explain all evil, denying the messiness that is essential to our concept of life. I argue by way of Phillips that while most LDS theodicies attempt to respond to the problem by denying the traditional absolute attributes of God, they nevertheless buy into the same problem by positing a God that shares modifications of the absolutes, ultimately provides explanation for suffering, and similarly denies the messiness that gives life its meaning. In this presentation, I will offer an alternative that I believe to be quite satisfying, as well as in line with LDS theology.

12. Charles Harrell, “Foreordination, Foreknowledge, and Free Will: The Doctrine of Pre-existence in Alma 13”

Alma 13 in the Book of Mormon is widely regarded by Latter-day Saints as teaching some of the most profound truths about preexistence found anywhere in scripture. Premortal agency, premortal sin and repentance, premortal redemption through Christ’s atonement, and premortal foreordination to receive “holy callings” on earth are all precepts extrapolated from Alma 13. Furthermore, Alma is seen as teaching that premortal foreordination is conditional. (What does that say about God’s foreknowledge?) The current LDS reading of Alma 13 is radically different from the way it was interpreted by the earliest converts to the Church, who don’t appear to have seen preexistence at all in Alma’s teachings. Indeed, it was more than fifty years later that Alma 13 was first used as a basis for teaching precepts about preexistence. This exegetical shift reflects a change in the theological consciousness of the Saints and has profound implications for LDS doctrines of the atonement, foreordination, foreknowledge, and free will.

13. Blair Hodges, “Jacob, Isaiah, and Social Justice in the Book of Mormon”

Joseph A. Grassi’s book, *Informing the Future: Social Justice in the New Testament*, demonstrates how the ideals of social justice which are embedded in the Hebrew scriptures are reflected in the New Testament. Many of these same themes also permeate the Book of Mormon. Like the Hebrew scriptures, the Book of Mormon appears to approach the idea of “righteousness” from a communal and even economic perspective. This is particularly evident in Jacob’s sermon condemning pride and inequality in Jacob 2. In this paper, I argue that the specific observations Grassi makes regarding Isaiah’s words are identifiable in Jacob’s sermon. Viewing Jacob through a social justice paradigm recontextualizes his sermon, and thus early Book of Mormon articulation more generally, toward a communal, rather than individualistic, soteriology.

14. Robert Smith, "Book of Mormon Theologies: A Thumbnail Sketch"

As with the Bible, the various authors and editors of the Book of Mormon demonstrate a variety of theologies or theological perspectives and preferences. This shows itself in separate emphases on liberation theology, remnant theology, covenantal law (Nephi), and soteriological law (Abinadi), as well as in several very different approaches to epistemology (social construction, experiential-experimental, divine witness, etc.), capped by the argument from implausibility, which employs Bayesian probability theory to give credence to the Book of Mormon—something not available to the Bible. By its very nature the Book of Mormon opts for an open canon and continuing revelation, which are the very heart of the Restoration but are likewise compatible with process theology. Finally, in view of apotheosis (godhood), the law of opposition, and true free agency, the problem of evil (theodicy) must yield.

15. Margaret Toscano, "War is Hell: The Ethics of War in the Book of Mormon"

The Book of Mormon has been used by Mormons both to justify war and to condemn it. Does one of these moral positions dominate the book itself? Does the Book of Mormon take an ethical stance in relationship to war? The conclusion of this paper is that the answers to these questions can be found only by examining the overarching narrative and thematic structures of the book. Such an examination suggests that the Book of Mormon equates war with the chains of hell. Actual war creates physical captivity, which is equated with spiritual bondage as well. Even a self-defensive war, while temporarily defending liberty, ultimately is part of a larger revenge cycle that leads to utter destruction for those on both sides of the conflict. The only thing that puts an end to violence is the inner transformation of the human heart, as illustrated by the conversion of the Lamanites.

16. Benjamin Huff, "The Book of the Weeping God"

The Book of Mormon is a revolutionary book that radically reinterprets the whole system of Christian teachings. In this paper, I trace its portrayal of the love of God. The God of the Old Testament appears to be judgmental, jealous, and vengeful, destroying sinners without remorse. Christ in the New Testament presents a much more gentle and caring side of the divine personality. Yet Mormons embrace an even more radically compassionate God than most find in the New Testament. Perhaps the most dramatic scriptural account of God's compassion appears in the Book of Moses, in Enoch's vision of the weeping

God. Yet while Joseph Smith translated the Book of Moses after having completed the Book of Mormon, this view of God is already visible throughout the Book of Mormon, not only in its description of God, but of his actions, and in the attitudes of his prophets.

17. Abraham J. Frost, "The Pearl of Great Price as the Basis of a Mormon Midrashic Tradition"

The Pearl of Great Price is perhaps the most fascinating of the scriptures that constitute the Mormon spiritual canon, but also one of the most difficult to understand. Its expansiveness and high level of cosmology calls attention to its complex structure. The purpose of this paper is to shed new light on the Pearl of Great Price by utilizing an ancient method of Jewish exegesis known as Midrash. Midrash opens up countless possibilities with regards to the underlying meaning of the Mormon scripture while retaining the importance and central role of the text as the basis of belief. By examining Joseph Smith's expansive addition to existing biblical narratives through his own emphases on the characters of Moses, Enoch, and Abraham, I will attempt to sketch a more comprehensive view of any role Midrash might have in unfolding Mormon biblical thought.

18. Heather Hardy, "The Book of Mormon's Internal Canon War"

All of the major sermons in the Book of Mormon delivered prior to 3 Nephi 9 are presented in the broader context of a dominant culture that accepts the authority and legitimacy of the brass plates. A subset of this culture also accepted the authority and legitimacy of a series of new revelations delivered to Lehi and his successors which both radically expanded the Deuteronomistic pattern of salvation to include the anticipation of a redeeming Messiah, personal resurrection, judgment, and eternal life in the kingdom of God, and also superseded the covenant regarding the possession of the land of Canaan with particular promises regarding their own promised land. Several key sermons and political disputes take on new clarification when viewed in light of the Nephite expansion of the canon.

19. Panel Discussion: "Secular Norms and the Scholarship of Faith"

What are the opportunities and risks to which faithful LDS scholars ought to be attentive as they engage intellectually with their peers, including secular scholars less than open to essential LDS beliefs and practices? What are the personal and professional opportunities and risks of entering the scholarly game on terms unfavorable to our

basic commitments? And how should the challenges of playing on such an uneven field be addressed? To what degree or in what way is it possible and useful to “bracket” personal religious beliefs in our “secular” religious scholarship? And when and how should these brackets be questioned and/or removed? Can a religious standpoint provide useful intellectual leverage against unconsidered assumptions of “secular” scholarship? Finally, what can be learned about these challenges from earlier generations of Mormon thinkers and from the history of Christian scholarship and apologetics?

#### 20. Grant Hardy, “The Promise of Book of Mormon Theology”

Reconstructing the theology of the Book of Mormon is a rather underdeveloped enterprise among Latter-day Saints, in part because we generally have not read the Book of Mormon with the sort of detail and rigor that biblical scholars have brought to the Old and New Testaments. In this paper I will explore some of the reasons for this state of affairs (including concerns over historicity), and then suggest ways in which believers and outsiders might work together to understand the religious ideas contained within the Mormon scripture, as well as the distinctive ways in which the text communicates its messages. I will provide specific examples from a book in progress about the theology of the Book of Mormon.

### SATURDAY, 22 SEPTEMBER

#### 21. Peter Huff, “Gratia Plena: A Catholic View of Grace in the Book of Mormon”

As a down payment toward more meaningful contact between Latter-day Saints and Roman Catholics, this paper seeks to offer a Catholic reflection on the doctrine of grace expressed in the Book of Mormon. The New Testament speaks of the incarnate Logos, along with the Virgin Mary and the proto-martyr Stephen, as “full of grace” (John 1:14, Luke 1:28, Acts 6:8). What impresses the Catholic reader of the Mormon “keystone” is the degree to which it, too, can be described as filled with grace. From Nephi’s vision of the “condescension of God” (1 Nephi 11:16) to Moroni’s call to holiness (Moroni 10:32–33), grace permeates the Mormon tradition’s premier scripture. Reading the text through Catholic eyes, we encounter an under-studied theology of grace remarkably comparable, even complementary, to Catholicism’s evolving insight into the heart of Christianity.

#### 22. Linda Soderquist, “The Importance of Being Meek”

Of all the qualities he possesses in perfection, Jesus invites burdened souls to learn of him because he is meek. Known as one of the most untranslatable of words in the New Testament, the word “meek” is found among a constellation of elect qualities. For example, along with love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith and temperance, meekness is called “fruit of the spirit” (Gal 5:22–23). While these qualities are in harmony to each other, a close examination of other passages, particularly in the Book of Mormon shows that meekness is actually set apart in its importance as a precondition for all the gifts of the spirit including faith, hope and charity.

#### 23. Brent J. Schmidt, “Obliging Grace in the Book of Mormon”

This presentation summarizes recent scholarship on grace or *charis*, emphasizing that this Greek word only implied covenants and reciprocity in the first century A.D. (a topic I discuss in more detail in an upcoming work). It will then compare this new understanding of grace, implying covenants, reciprocity, and obligations with uses of grace in the Book of Mormon. Finally, the presentation describes how the Book of Mormon consistently uses grace according to its ancient context of reciprocity, avoiding Augustinian and Lutheran notions of “free,” “unmerited,” and “unconditional” grace that were common in the nineteenth-century world of Joseph Smith.

#### 24. “*Prisca Theologia* in the Book of Mormon”

*Prisca theologia*, or “first theology,” is a philosophical approach advocated by early Patristic writers trying to make sense of the meaning of Greek philosophy in Christian theology. According to *prisca theologia*, pagan philosophies retain fragments of an original revelation to Adam. In a more secular Renaissance version, the *prisca* was the *philosophia perennis*. While this philosophy motivated significant antiquarianism in the Renaissance, it was fundamentally a way of coming to terms with religious plurality in the present and religious influence in the past. While Joseph Smith was a fairly consistent practitioner of *prisca theologia*, the Book of Mormon has a somewhat different view on the topic. This talk explores contexts and content for the “first theology” in the Book of Mormon.

25. Jeffrey Hansen, “2 Nephi 2: Our Choice Requires Opposition in All Things”

The Atonement is sometimes understood as God’s response to broken divine law, but in 2 Nephi 2, Lehi asserts a different relationship between law and atonement. For Lehi, law is not the implacable standard of redemption, which even God must satisfy; rather, law and atonement together provide a structure of opposition in which we can choose to receive redemption. Redemption requires opposition because redemption requires our assent, and assent requires choice, and choice requires an opposition within us, as well as external laws to structure our choices. On Lehi’s account of redemption, we can appreciate why our estrangement from God is as necessary as our atonement in the Messiah. Lehi invites us to trust in the purposes of God, who has arranged all in order that we might have joy.

26. Rico Martinez, “Adam Fell That Men Might Be”: An Exegetical History”

Behind the simple phrase “Adam fell that men might be” (2 Nephi 2:25) is a dynamic and often turbulent history, all but unknown to contemporary readers of the Book of Mormon. This session will explore the earliest understandings of this passage as illustrated by diaries, polemical writings, and sermons. This process tells a fascinating story of forgotten readings that failed to survive and allows us to better appreciate why other readings wielded tremendous staying power. It also allows us to gain insight into the underlying, concealed, and often competing theological concerns and exegetical worries that Mormon interpreters have held, and the strategies they employed in crafting unique Mormon narratives of the Fall.

27. Dennis Potter, “Religious Disagreement: Internal and External”

The interlocutors in the religious disagreement debate assume that the beliefs of the various religious systems are logically incompatible. Call this the assumption of *external religious disagreement*. In this paper, I will argue that this assumption is more problematic than has been generally recognized. To do so, I will discuss the implications of *internal religious disagreement*, an oft-neglected aspect of the religious diversity debate. Also, I argue that to properly understand the implications of internal and external religious disagreement we need to distinguish between *individual* and *group* disagreement. The upshot is that whether external religious disagreement exists

depends on how we settle internal religious disagreements. I conclude that there is usually no fact of the matter as to whether two religious traditions disagree. A corollary of my argument is that there is no fact of the matter as to what counts as orthodoxy in any particular religious tradition, unless the problematic doctrine of *interpretative gnosticism* is correct.

28. Mark Rasmuson, “Could God Really Learn by Being Mortal? Two Interpretations of Alma 7:11–13”

This paper sorts out some of the implications of two very different Christological interpretations of Alma 7:11–13 and argues for the superiority of the more robust interpretation. The thrust of the argument relies on this theological premise: God could not have accomplished the same salvific objective through a different method. Among the important questions raised by the two interpretations regards why God would take on a mortal body and whether God could actually learn anything new by so doing. This discussion involves two different ways of understanding the meaning of the first part of verse 13, which reads, “Now the Spirit knoweth all things; nevertheless the Son of God suffereth according to the flesh...”

29. Book Panel: *Exploring Mormon Thought, Vol 3: Of God and Gods*, by Blake T. Ostler

Blake Ostler’s systematic theology offered in his *Exploring Mormon Thought* series is unique in its scope and completeness in the history of Mormon thought. Join Adam Miller, Dennis Potter, Jim McLachlan, and Blake as we discuss the third volume, which includes a survey of “Kingship Monotheism” through Ancient Hebrew, Second Temple Judaism, Early Christianity, and Mormon Thought. Ostler’s proposals about the eternity of God’s kingship and Mormon social trinitarianism are as controversial as they are compelling.

30. Keith Lane, “Hope in Christ: The Better World of Grace and Sanctification”

This paper explores the concept of hope and the role it plays in the life of the disciple. Hope is centered in Christ primarily, and on his promises secondarily, though it does acknowledge, trust, and act on those promises of times and conditions to come. The virtue of hope is fundamentally at work in the realm of actually following and developing of Christ-like attributes (with charity above all), as one moves through justification towards sanctification, brought about by a grace-filled hope.

31. Book Panel: *Rube Goldberg Machines: Essays in Mormon Theology*, by Adam S. Miller

Consisting of fourteen short essays varying widely in style and scope, Adam Miller's 2012 *Rube Goldberg Machines* outlines a new vision of Mormon theology, its purpose, its domain, and its method. The book is deeply, madly Mormon, yet it arrives at surprising interpretations of Mormon scripture and teachings. Miller's alternately dense and epigrammatic style invites secondary interpretation, and this session will feature four readings of the *Machines*, each pursuing one of the footpaths Miller has opened through the spiritual thickets of faith, history, and grace.

One of the presentations:

Jacob Baker, "Consider the Theologian: A Poor Wayfaring Rube Goldbergian Tribute"

For several years now Adam Miller has become increasingly influential among many Mormon thinkers in re-shaping and re-purposing the parameters of Mormon thought. Written as an homage to the style and central themes of his work, this paper explores where the Rube Goldberg theologian might plausibly find herself within the larger theological landscape. In particular it examines the "Mormoness" of Miller's work and argues that both conceptually and aesthetically Miller's oeuvre is the philosophical equivalent to the thoroughgoing immanence of *Napoleon Dynamite* in film and Steven Peck's *The Scholar of Moab* in literature: works that are abundantly, ontologically Mormon in nature in part precisely because they rarely address Mormonism as such directly. Miller's work is possibly the pre-eminent vehicle for understanding what constitutes the Mormon theologian's world and tasks.

32. John W. Nicholson, "Faith as a Doxastic Practice: A Philosophical Consideration of Alma 32"

In my presentation, I attempt to provide both an exegetical as well as a critically interpretive account of Alma's famous discourse on faith (found in Alma 32) and argue that this discourse can best be understood as representing faith as special kind of doxastic practice (a knowledge producing practice). In this regard Alma's account shares many common features with the epistemological viewpoint of reliabilism, an approach to characterizing belief forming, informing, and justifying practices as a means of gaining knowledge and as reliable indicators or the truth of religious propositions based on religious experiences. One of my goals will be to show how Alma's discourse on faith serves to meet many of the typical skeptical objections about the veridical nature of religious experiences and the extent to which the religious beliefs based on such experiences can be properly said to be justified as constituting knowledge.

33. Charles Randall Paul, "The Book of Mormon on 'The True Church' and Religious Pluralism"

What is the only true church? Assuming only one church was right, Joseph Smith was prompted to seek it out amid the fierce antipathy between all the contending Christian sects. The Book of Mormon provides several keys to understanding why God who loves all humankind has promoted multiple cultures with diverse religions while proclaiming there is only one true church. The Book of Mormon helps narrow the search by angelic revelation saying that there are really only Two Churches, one, the Lord's, the other, the devil's. This leads to a theological conclusion that challenges both universalist and exclusivist views of the only true and living church while at the same time suggesting a unique idea for what it means to be a Zion people.