

Joseph Smith, Jesus and Satanic Opposition: Atonement, Evil and the Mormon Vision, by Douglas J. Davies. Ashgate, 2010. 282 pp., index, bibliography, pb. \$29.22. ISBN-13: 9781409406709.

Reviewed by Kurt Widmer, Humboldt Universität zu Berlin, kurt.widmer@uleth.ca

Keywords

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, Mormonism, Christianity, Joseph Smith, Theology, Soteriology

In “Joseph Smith, Jesus and Satanic Opposition” Douglas Davies attempts to bring coherency to the theology of the Salt Lake City based Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Davies has undertaken a difficult task given that Mormon church leadership has for most of its existence shied away from any comprehensive theological expressions of the church’s beliefs. In a subtle way Davies’ work then is a comparative analysis between Latter-day Saint Mormonism and western Christian (Catholic and Protestant) themes in systematic theology. In comprising his analysis Davies touches on several areas Israelology, Pneumatology, Ecclesiology, Theology proper, and Christology being among them.

The “Plan of Salvation” and the impact the narrative has had on Mormon theological development provides the centerpiece for Davies arguments. The Plan, or Mormon soteriology, is much more complex than western Christianity’s. It can be explained as the primordial drama, the theogeny if you will, that explains both the gods, and therefore mankind’s origin and destiny. Davies argues that the Mormon worldview is interpreted through the events that occurred in the pre-mortal council in heaven. It, he argues, contains all pertinent answers to life’s great questions. Why are we here? Where did we come from? The reason for, and the benefit of, evil, are all answered and explained through the Mormon plan. I would be inclined to agree with the author. The complexity of the narrative leaves very few of life’s central questions unanswered.

Davies’ selection of sources is broad. He does not limit himself to the Mormon canon but includes contributions from the lay membership as well. Art, poetry, and hymnody are included and all are drawn upon as sources. The choice of non-canonical sources, while extremely valuable as a gauge of the memberships interpretation of “official” beliefs (audience response criticism), does illuminate a broader concern, namely what do Mormons believe? With no clearly expressed, formal, comprehensive statement of belief, an investigator is left with is a collection of statements over time by various individuals, some enjoying canonical status others not. A prime example of this is the

King Follett discourse, Joseph Smith's most famous sermon. While the concepts taught within the sermon are hinted at in canonical sources without the extrapolations provided in the KFD those other statements would be non-sensical.

Systematizing the theology of a tradition that fails to express itself theologically is a difficult task. As a prophetic tradition, the church's leadership has a unique status in that they can produce binding scripture. New scripture then often supercedes the older. The role of prophetic leadership and continuing revelation often creates a disconnect, or lack of correlation between past and present statements. This has led to many areas that lack any formal systematization, and or development. Davies points to the theology surrounding the role of the Holy Ghost in this instance. The question surrounding the divinity of the Holy Ghost has not been satisfactorily addressed. Though attributed with divine status, he lacks a corporeal body, which is the basic requirement for divinity within the tradition.

Any attempt at a presentation of a Mormon theology would need to take historical development of the Mormon belief system into account, as earlier expressions of Mormon belief may be radically different from current interpretations. Two main areas that reflect this are the debates surrounding the nature of God (Adam - God, and Elohim - Jehovah controversies,) and the gathering to Zion. Davies does provide proper context for his analysis on the development of these concepts.

Most western Christian groups have attempted to identify with biblical Israel, as God's select, or chosen people. The degree of identification may take several forms from superceding the historical Israel, and therefore dismissing it, to their being a restoration, or a continuation of "true Israel. Mormonism, for the most part, has fallen into the latter category. While the foundational claim was based upon being a restoration of first century Christianity, there has been almost a conscious effort to dismiss Christianity in favor of identification with, or, a return to being biblical Israel. Law, covenant, sacrifice, temple, dietary restrictions, and priesthood, all play or played a significant role in historical Mormon self-identification. The identification is not however static. Davies argues that a shift in Mormon self-identification as "true Israel" (Mormon Israel) to Mormon Christianity has occurred. For Davies, Mormon Israel reaches a pinnacle in the church led by James Strang who reintroduced both the Sabbath and animal sacrifice. While there has been a historic self-identification of Mormonism as true Israel, the dietary laws, (word of Wisdom) were not enforced, and their relation to then current temperance movements and later economic difficulties are the primary reasons for their introduction rather than any conscious effort to identify with biblical Israel. One need only contrast this same "self identification" with Israel

within the Adventist tradition and the result as seen in their dietary laws, and ritual practices. Despite some movement towards “Mormon Christianity,” I am uncertain that a shift away from a “Mormon Israel” has occurred.

While faith committed academics, and members in general, make attempts to explain Mormon theological concepts these attempts lack any official sanction from the organization itself. Until the organizational leadership begins to sanction or officially accept the writings of its best minds as true interpretations and expositions of Mormon theology, or official, meaningful, creedal statements are made encapsulating Mormon beliefs there is no point in speaking of a Mormon theology. Coming to grasps with Mormonism on a deeper theological level is no easy task. As Davies clearly explains there are terminology, and interpretive differences between the Latter-day Saints and historic western Christianity. While the terms used may be the same the meanings in the terms are often vastly different. Understanding this in and of itself may aid in furthering any dialogue between the two camps.

The book is by no means an easy read. A strong background in theology is certainly helpful. Historians will not find any new illuminations. However for those seeking to understand Latter-day Saint Mormonism within a paradigm of a systematic theology should not bypass the book.