

Review: JAM503

## A SUMMARY CRITIQUE

### A DIFFERENT JESUS? WORSE: A DIFFERENT GOD, GOSPEL, AND FAITH

a book review of  
*A Different Jesus? The Christ of the Latter-day Saints*  
by Robert L. Millet  
(Eerdmans, 2005)

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The advertisement for the book from Eerdmans includes this claim: "Intended to inform rather than to convince or persuade, *A Different Jesus?* clears away misconceptions and doctrinal distortions that characterize more polemical works about Mormonism."

One could truly wish that the intention of this book was to inform rather than to convince or persuade, but the fact is that this new publication from Eerdmans marks the first time a historically evangelical publisher has put in print a purposefully apologetic work from a believing member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS, Mormons). Unlike *How Wide the Divide?* (InterVarsity Press, 1997) by Craig Blomberg and Stephen E. Robinson, *A Different Jesus?* contains no non-LDS response or counterargument. It is LDS through and through, and is clearly intended to provide a defense of the claim that the Mormon Church is a Christian church that, though different in particular respects from traditional Christian churches, leads its people to faith in the same Jesus found in Christian Scripture.

The clearest evidence that this work is intended to be apologetic and persuasive is its organization and layout. The key theological issue that separates biblical Christianity from Mormonism is well known to all: as Joseph Smith expressed it, "We have imagined and supposed that God was God from all eternity. I will refute that idea and take away the veil, so that you may see....It is the first principle of the Gospel to know for a certainty the Character of God, and to know...that he was once a man like us; yea, that God himself, the Father of us all, dwelt on an earth, the same as Jesus Christ himself did; and I will show it from the Bible" (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 345–46). Mormonism is a religion that promotes a plurality of Gods, asserting that God Himself is an exalted man and that we humans are of the same species as God. Mormon author Robert Millet, however, does not even begin to raise the issue of God having once been a man in a clear context until page 143, and even there, he touches on it only briefly in a way that does not at all do justice to the historical writings of LDS leaders. When you bury the primary, foundational difference between Mormonism and Christianity in the last quarter of the book, having spent the first part purposefully seeking to show parallels and similarities, it is plain that you are seeking to persuade and convert. The work is a Trojan horse apologetic.

**The Topics Covered.** *A Different Jesus?* is specifically written in response to the assertion that Mormons worship another Christ than the one presented in the Bible and worshiped in Christian churches. It is a well-written apologetic for the distinctives of the Mormon faith, one that weaves numerous citations of C. S. Lewis (a favorite of the scholars at Mormon-owned Brigham Young University [BYU]) and various evangelical writers into the fabric of its arguments, placing these statements right alongside the words of LDS leaders

and prophets. It consistently argues that there is no solid ground for denying Mormonism full standing as a Christian religion that, though unique on particular points, should not be excluded from the family.

Millet presents chapters on a number of important issues. He is well aware of the literature that exists on each subject, and crafts his words very, very carefully. When presenting Joseph Smith's "First Vision," for example, he anticipates the objections that are founded on the many historical and internal inconsistencies regarding the account, and cites Stephen Prothero's assertion, "Such complaints, however, are much ado about relatively nothing" (p. 6). To those who have read widely in works on Mormonism, not just in its modern form, but throughout the changes in its history, Millet's purpose and agenda is very clear. Even in the midst of presenting a basic history of Mormonism (no small task, to be sure), Millet pursues his goals of deflecting criticism of Mormonism and its scriptures, and of raising doubts concerning issues such as the sufficiency of the Bible (*sola scriptura*), the canon of Scripture, the role of councils, and the frequent differences that exist in a very broadly defined "evangelicalism."

After introducing Mormonism, he presents the LDS view of authority by explaining the necessity of a "restoration." He then moves into a discussion of the "Mormon Jesus" and the LDS gospel. Millet follows this with a discussion of postmortem evangelism and baptism for the dead, and then he concludes with a series of the most common questions that Millet says that he hears when he is traveling and speaking on the subject of Mormon/evangelical relations.

The reader who is familiar with this subject cannot help but find particular elements of this book fascinating. Millet tries to create an LDS doctrine of "justification," but in the process he is forced to use almost no LDS scripture (since it is only a minor topic in Mormon theology) and to rely instead on rarely read sources, such as *Orson Pratt's Works* (100). It is ironic to note that LDS apologists are quick to complain when Christian apologists cite the very same sources. Millet quickly passes over the subject of temples, with no mention of the mockery of orthodox Christian beliefs that marked those ceremonies for generations. He also presents a lengthy, involved, strongly argued and documented discussion of 1 Corinthians 15:29 and baptism for the dead, one that is certain to challenge any evangelical reader who has not already tackled the context or is lacking biblical discernment; it clearly is intended not just to inform, but to persuade.

The answers Millet offers to the questions are likewise purely apologetic. He addresses the indefensible Book of Abraham and the ahistorical nature of the Book of Mormon, and, in both cases, presents the standard line of defense offered by the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS). To see Eerdmans print this kind of material, which is (and has been, repeatedly) so easily challenged and refuted, without response is deeply troubling. This is especially so due to the fact that Millet includes an entire section where he rightly attacks the approach of liberalism (for example, The Jesus Seminar) for its liberal criticism of Scripture and laments the collapse of many in evangelicalism on this central and vital issue. This creates a "connection" that gives the book its missionary appeal.

Finally, one of the questions that Millet asks and answers is, "What is the appeal of Mormonism? Why are people choosing to leave their old faiths and join yours?" The answer, as presented, could have been found in all of the LDS missionary literature available at your local Temple Visitors Center. It is pure proselytization, and it surely betrays the assertion of the Eerdmans description that it has been written "to inform rather than to convince or persuade."

**The Truly Troubling Elements.** Millet, understandably, is concerned to emphasize the purity of motives in his work. His motivation is irrelevant at best, however, given that Robert Millet is not a General Authority of the LDS Church. He is a BYU scholar, and for the present, anyway, the theology of the LDS Church is still determined by someone other than the staff of BYU. This is nonetheless curious, inasmuch as he presents himself as a kind of authority that officially can represent or determine LDS Church doctrine when this is not the case.

I was glad to see him openly present certain elements of LDS theology that some of his compatriots have decided are no longer definitional, but even here the reader does not get the whole story. For example, he

openly acknowledges that Jesus is the only begotten of the Father in the flesh (66, 74), but adds, “While Latter-day Saints clearly believe that Jesus is the Son of God the Father, there is no authoritative doctrinal statement within Mormonism that explains how the conception of Jesus was accomplished” (74). This is somewhat similar to the claim of his colleagues Daniel Peterson and Stephen Ricks that the idea that God the Father begot Jesus in the flesh was reflective of “scattered nineteenth-century speculations” and is not official LDS teaching. Yet, anyone familiar with the consistent teaching on the subject knows just how widespread the teaching has been, and how it has been presented in the guides prepared by the LDS Church leadership for use in the church’s own priesthood and educational programs.

Most disturbing, however, was Millet’s presentation, buried in the last quarter of the book, of the concept that God Himself was once an exalted man. This central tenet of the LDS faith—the reason careful and concerned Christian apologists long have declared the Christ of Mormonism a deception (the offspring of an exalted man from another planet is not the Christ of Christianity), and Mormonism itself a non-Christian religion—is treated as if it is a doctrine almost unknown, and unknowable. He writes,

We really do not know more than what was stated by Joseph Smith, and that is precious little. Insights concerning God’s life before Godhood are not found in the standard works, in official declarations or proclamations, in current handbooks or curricular materials, nor are doctrinal expositions on the subject delivered in general conference today. This topic is not what we would call a central and saving doctrine, one that must be believed (or understood) in order to hold a temple recommend or be in good standing in the Church. (144–45)

Remember that Joseph Smith said that this very belief was “the first principle of the Gospel.”<sup>1</sup> Millet was very careful, once again, in his wording. Note that he said “in current handbooks or curricular materials.”

Through the year 2000, every LDS couple seeking to be married in an LDS temple was required to read and study the church publication titled *Achieving a Celestial Marriage* (1992). The first portion of this book is dedicated to explaining the importance of celestial marriage, and includes such statements as these:

God was once a man who, by obedience, advanced to his present state of perfection; through obedience and celestial marriage we may progress to the point where we become like God....God Became God by Obedience to Law....If God became God by obedience to all of the gospel law with the crowning point being the celestial law of marriage, then that’s the only way I can become a god. (4–5)

Has the entire LDS Church forgotten the content of this manual in less than half a decade? Surely not. Anyone actually familiar with the content of the King Follett Funeral Discourse knows Smith waxed quite eloquent on what Mormon leaders are now wishing to sweep under the proverbial rug. Brigham Young and the generations that followed him likewise made God’s exaltation from man to the position of God central to their preaching, and the LDS temple ceremonies and the entire concept of eternal progression are completely unintelligible without this doctrine. The entire goal of Mormonism, that being the exaltation of man to his “full potential,” that is, godhood, is tied to the belief that the god of this planet, Elohim, was once a man and advanced to the position of godship. When that fact is allowed to begin the conversation, however, Millet’s entire project of presenting Mormonism as just another denomination of Christianity is left without any foundation, for Christianity is, at its most basic point, inalterably monotheistic, and Mormonism quite simply *is not*.

**The Real Source of this Book: Richard Mouw.** Why is Eerdmans publishing a book intended to defend the LDS faith and to persuade people to consider its claims and join its membership? Because they were convinced to do so by the president of Fuller Theological Seminary, Richard Mouw. This is his work. He writes the foreword and the afterword.

Mouw came front and center in November, 2004, when he “apologized” to all Mormons on behalf, evidently, of all evangelicals for “bearing false witness” about them and “demonizing” them. When pressed for details as to why he did so, he repeated Millet’s argument about the nature of God almost to the letter, showing an implicit trust in the version of God offered by BYU scholarship, and, conversely, a great ignorance of the writings of the LDS leadership. Those who have labored in LDS apologetics for decades have provided overwhelming documentation in rebuttal of Mouw’s “apology” on our behalf.

The fact that an LDS scholar has been given free reign to promote a religion that denies the Trinity and presents, at its best, a semi-Pelagian view of “salvation,” that attacks *sola scriptura* and any number of other basic Christian beliefs, within a book published by an erstwhile “Christian” publisher is bad enough, but Mouw’s contribution is far worse. In his afterword, Mouw speaks as an evangelical, and repeats his disagreements with Mormonism. He even touches on the nature of God, rightly stating that “Judaism and Christianity have been united in their insistence that the Creator and the creation—including God’s human creatures—are divided by an unbridgeable ‘being’ gap....On this view of things, to confuse the Creator’s being with anything in his creation is to commit the sin of idolatry” (182). He then moves on within one page of text, however, to create no end of confusion by writing, “I think that an open-minded Christian reader of this book will sense that Bob Millet is in fact trusting in the Jesus of the Bible for his salvation. That is certainly my sense” (183). There is no question of Millet’s intense religious devotion. The fact remains, however, that his religion teaches that God is an exalted man; his religion still speaks of a “heavenly mother” and of God the Father having a body of flesh and bones. His religion still teaches that Jesus is the only begotten physical offspring of this exalted man from another planet, and if all of that is irrelevant to trusting in “the Jesus of the Bible for his salvation,” is there any meaning left in language at all? The passionate words of Paul in Galatians (e.g., 1:6–9; 5:1–4) or of John in 1 John (e.g., 2:18–24) have no place in Mouw’s apologetic.

**Welcome to the Postevangelical Age.** With compelling force, the publication of *A Different Jesus?* shows us that we have moved into a postmodern, postevangelical age where there is simply nothing left in the faith that is not negotiable, that cannot be put on the table for “discussion” at the altar of human inquiry. Should we be surprised? Isn’t the fact that “Christian” publishers print such unorthodox viewpoints as open theism, inclusivism, or even postmortem evangelism an indication that we have already moved far beyond the days when orthodoxy meant anything? *A Different Jesus?* simply reenforces the fact that we must recognize that our need for discernment goes right with us into the “Christian” bookstore, for there is truly no place left where the believer can drop his or her guard.

— reviewed by James R. White

## NOTES

1. *Teachings of the Prophet Smith*, compiled by Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1976), 345–46.