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THE QUEER PHILOSOPHIES OF MEN MINGLED WITH SCRIPTURE

Daniel Ortner

Review of Blaire Ostler, *Queer Mormon Theology: An Introduction* (Newburgh, IN: By Common Consent Press, 2021). 152 pages. \$10.95 (paperback).

Abstract: *Blaire Ostler attempts to show how “Mormon theology is inherently queer” and may be expanded to be fully “inclusive” of LGBTQ+ members. Unfortunately, Ostler conflates God’s love with indulgence for behavior that he has described as sinful. She offers a pantheistic/panentheistic conception of deity that collapses any differences between men and woman in sharp contrast to the Latter-day Saint understanding that men and women are complementary and require one another for exaltation and eternal life. Many of this book’s arguments are sophistry and the philosophies of men mingled with scripture. None of it is compatible with revealed truth contained in The Family: A Proclamation to the World and consistently taught by prophets, seers, and revelators.*

Blaire Ostler’s¹ book *Queer Mormon Theology: An Introduction* was published with much fanfare. The publisher announced that *Queer Mormon Theology* “is the kind of book that BCC Press was born for.”² Since publication, it has received a lot of attention and praise, including

1. Despite their similar names, Blaire Ostler should not be confused with Blake Ostler. Blake is a philosopher and practicing attorney who has written orthodox and expansive books of philosophy. As discussed in this review, Blaire Ostler’s theology is far from orthodox.

2. “Queer Mormon Theology: An Introduction,” *By Common Consent* (June 8, 2021), <https://bycommonconsent.com/2021/06/08/queer-mormon-theology-an-introduction/>.

gushing reviews in the Association of Mormon Letters³ and *Exponent II*,⁴ official congratulations and commendation by Affirmation,⁵ and positive reviews in numerous podcasts.

This attention is largely unsurprising. Ostler's book has a provocative thesis that appeals to those who view themselves as erudite and socially progressive. She⁶ argues that "Mormon theology is inherently queer" and "Mormon theology holds the building blocks for an orthodoxy of love and inclusion beyond what is discussed in Sunday School" (p. 4). Ostler claims to offer an expansive vision of doctrine while still holding firm to "Mormon beliefs, testimony, doctrine, theology, culture, and heritage" (p. 2). Indeed, she assures the reader she is "not suggesting a change to the fundamental principles in Mormon theology and doctrine, but rather advocate[s] for a more robust vision of what Mormon theology and doctrine already includes" (p. 17).

Can Ostler successfully navigate this tightrope between Mormon doctrine and queer theology? Unfortunately, the book falters under the weight of its own sophistry.

As someone who is not a member of the LGBTQ+ community, I cannot speak as to whether Ostler offers a compelling book of queer theology. But judging Ostler's book from the perspective of orthodoxy and the revealed truths of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, I can say that the book fails spectacularly as an example of Latter-day Saint theology. Indeed, every page and almost every paragraph is filled with things that are directly contrary to truth revealed from heaven through modern-day prophets, seers, and revelators.

3. Erik Champenois, "Ostler, *Queer Mormon Theology: An Introduction* (Reviewed by Erik Champenois)," *Association of Mormon Letters*, <https://www.associationmormonletters.org/reviews/older-reviews/ostler-queer-mormon-theology-an-introduction-reviewed-by-erik-champenois/>.

4. Jody England Hansen, "Embrace Queerness — A Review of 'Queer Mormon Theology – An Introduction,' by Blaire Ostler," *Exponent II* (June 28, 2021), <https://www.the-exponent.com/embrace-queerness-a-review-of-queer-mormon-theology-an-introduction-by-blaire-ostler/>.

5. "Hope and Beauty in Ostler's *Queer Mormon Theology: An Introduction*," *Affirmation Blog* (June 6, 2021), <https://affirmation.org/queer-mormon-theology/>.

6. A note on pronoun usage: Ostler identifies as queer, bisexual, and intersex, but I asked the author about her preferred pronouns and was told that the use of she/her was acceptable.

Red Flags

From the start of the book, an observant reader is likely to see red flags.⁷ The purpose of Ostler's book is to "explor[e] the ways that The Church can adapt to the queerness of our theology" (p. 2). Ostler believes she is "called by the Spirit to ... share the queer gospel of Christ through Mormon theology" (p. 4). With this framing, Ostler squarely identifies as a queer evangelist looking to change Church doctrine rather than someone looking to explore Church doctrine as it has been revealed through the course of the Restoration.

Still, Ostler cultivates ambiguity in the book concerning her relationship with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. One could finish the entire book unsure as to whether Ostler remains an active member of the Church. A blog post written by Ostler shortly after the publication of *Queer Mormon Theology* clarifies and reveals her status. She explains that she "could not have written such a faithful, inspiring, and hopeful theology while worshiping in a building that threatened my personhood," that "leaving the pews was the best thing that ever happened to my testimony," and that she has "no plans to return to the pews anytime soon."⁸ Ostler renounces any allegiance to what she describes as "flawed institutions, cissexist and heterosexist handbook policies, or discursive theologies predicated on homogenized, white, androcentric, cis-het supremacy."⁹

In other words, Ostler's theology is unmoored from any of the foundational pillars and guardrails of orthodoxy that God has given us to ensure that we would not be "tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the slight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive" (Ephesians 4:14). It is therefore

7. One red flag is Ostler's reliance on the writings of Taylor Petrey who introduced her to the "queerness of procreation in Mormon theology" and "greatly influenced [her] own view of how Gods create in Mormon theology" (p. 69). As Greg Smith persuasively argues, Petrey's writings misinterpret Church teachings on the topic and therefore find ambiguity and change in Church teachings on homosexuality where there has actually been great consistency. See Gregory L. Smith, "Feet of Clay: Queer Theory and the Church of Jesus Christ," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 43 (2021), 107–278, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/feet-of-clay-queer-theory-and-the-church-of-jesus-christ/>.

8. Blaire Ostler, "Queer Mormon Theology: An Introduction," *Blaire Ostler* (June 23, 2021), <http://www.blaireostler.com/journal/2021/6/23/queer-mormon-theology-an-introduction>.

9. Ibid.

unsurprising that Ostler's book can best be summed up as a fine example of the philosophies of men mingled with scripture.

A Distorted Sense of Love

Ostler argues that the foundations of Mormon theology may be identified using five sources: 1) scriptures, 2) tradition (including the teachings of prophets and apostles), 3) reason, 4) experience, and 5) the Holy Spirit (p. 13). A problem, though, is that Ostler greatly diminishes the role and importance of scriptures and tradition. For instance, she dismisses anything that she disagrees with from prophets and apostles by claiming that if a prophet teaches something "that conflicts with the greatest law of love, they are not speaking as a prophet" (p. 107). Reason and the Holy Spirit ultimately play subservient roles as well. Instead, she elevates her feelings and lived experience above everything else.

For Ostler, if something is part of her lived experience it must be affirmed and supported. Ostler briefly recognizes that this reasoning may be flawed by noting that "'natural' is not tantamount to 'moral'" (p. 15). She nevertheless quickly reverts to equating what we experience in this fallen world with what is good and true and eternal.

It is my belief that if you have loved as I have loved, you would see there is no sin in my love. If you shared my gender experience, you would see there is no sin in my gender. If you could experience queerness with us, you would love us the way God loves us. (p. 16)

For Ostler, the ultimate determination of whether a saying or teaching is loving is how it makes the recipient feel. If someone does not "receive ... as an expression of love" then our actions "cannot be deemed an act of love — even if love was the intention" (p. 31). Therefore, "if you are ever in doubt about whether or not a request, policy, commandment, talk, or even comment is an act of love, ask the person(s) whom the policy, talk, or comment affects" (p. 31).

Ostler correctly argues that we must do more to love members of the LGBTQ+ communities. However, she repeatedly offers a very simplistic and distorted notion of love. For her, because "God is love, then to the extent we oppress love, we oppress our godly potential" (p. 27). Indeed, according to Ostler "there is no clear distinction between loving God, loving Jesus, loving Christ, and loving your fellow beings" (p. 27). Because "God's love must be plural" and "God is no respecter of persons," (p. 28), his love is unconditional and we, too, must "learn to love non-exclusively

and unconditionally” (p. 27). Any “command or request” that conflicts with this unconditional affirmation should be “reworked, reimagined, or discarded” (p. 29). Accordingly, “[h]armful requests, mandates, and policies made under the disguise of love should be resisted through strict obedience to God’s first commandment” to love people unconditionally (p. 30).

This is not consistent with the teachings of our scriptural canon. As King Benjamin explained, “The natural man is an enemy to God” and will remain so unless he “yields to the enticing of the Holy Spirit, and putteth off the natural man and becometh a saint” (Mosiah 3:19). As Elder D. Todd Christofferson reminds us, the Savior “cannot take any of us into His kingdom just as we are, ‘for no unclean thing can dwell there, or dwell in his presence.’”¹⁰ Because God and Christ love us, they do not “want to leave [us] ‘just as [we] are.’”¹¹ Instead, they call for us to repent and change. This call to change is an act of ultimate divine love even though we may be resentful or not see this necessary correction as loving. As Elder Russell M. Nelson explains, “real love for the sinner may compel courageous confrontation — not acquiescence! Real love does not support self-destructing behavior.”¹²

Pantheism/Panentheism vs. Materialism

Latter-day Saints believe in a Father in Heaven who is material, tangible, and immanent. Joseph Smith emphasized that “[t]he Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man’s; the Son also” and dismissed the popular notion that the Father or Son could be said to dwell in our hearts (D&C 130:3, 22). While members of the Godhead are united in purpose, they are distinctly separate beings. As Elder Jeffery R. Holland cogently summed up,

We believe these three divine persons constituting a single Godhead are united in purpose, in manner, in testimony, in mission. We believe Them to be filled with the same godly sense of mercy and love, justice and grace, patience, forgiveness, and redemption. I think it is accurate to say we

10. Elder D. Todd Christofferson, “The Love of God,” *Liahona* 45, no. 11 (November 2021), 16, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/liahona/2021/11/15christofferson>.

11. *Ibid.*, 18.

12. Elder Russell M. Nelson, “Teach Us Tolerance and Love,” *Ensign* 24, no. 5 (May 1994), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1994/05/teach-us-tolerance-and-love>.

believe They are one in every significant and eternal aspect imaginable except believing Them to be three persons combined in one substance, a Trinitarian notion never set forth in the scriptures because it is not true.¹³

While Ostler refers to God as immanent (p. 22), her description of God's attributes is actually far closer to a type of pantheism or panentheism¹⁴ which equates God with the laws and cosmic forces of the universe. Ostler's version of deity is "a divine presence among and within us" (p. 22). Moreover, "there is no clear distinction between us and God" because "we are coeternal with God" and "our intelligence is intimately and inextricably bound with God's intelligence" (p. 22). For Ostler, this means that "we are part of the other, and the other is part of us" (p. 22). Later, she goes even further to describe God as "a community of interconnected, progressing, super-intelligent, free agents" (p. 26).

With this pantheistic/panentheistic backdrop, Ostler distorts the Church's doctrine that we have Heavenly Parents to argue that there is "no God unless it includes male and female representation" and therefore "God's materiality and embodiment ... is queer encompassing" (p. 24). By collapsing the separateness of God and mankind, Ostler projects our own attributes and traits onto deity. Indeed, Ostler goes so far as to conclude that "there are many more projections of God beyond cisgender, heterosexual assumptions when all gender identities and anatomies are made in the image of God" (p. 24).¹⁵

This is a sleight of hand at best and incompatible with revealed truth. Exaltation in Latter-day Saint theology requires complementarity, which is the exact opposite of Ostler's notion of queerness. As Elder David A. Bednar explained, "For divine purposes, male and female spirits are different, distinctive, and complementary. ... The unique combination of spiritual, physical, mental, and emotional capacities of both males and

13. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland, "The Only True God and Jesus Christ Whom He Hath Sent," *Ensign* 37, no. 11 (November 2007), 40, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2007/11/the-only-true-god-and-jesus-christ-whom-he-hath-sent>.

14. Pantheism is "a doctrine that equates God with the forces and laws of the universe." *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. "pantheism," <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/pantheism>. Panentheism is "the doctrine that God includes the world as a part though not the whole of his being." *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. "panentheism," <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/panentheism>.

15. Ostler also asserts that "no matter where a person falls on the gender spectrum, according to the Bible, the image of God is both male *and* female, not male *or* female" (p. 57).

females were needed to implement the plan of happiness”¹⁶ This “binary creation is essential to the plan of salvation.”¹⁷ If males and females must come together for exaltation, then this union is precisely cisgender and heterosexual in nature. As Elder and Sister Renlund expressed, “Male and female spirits were created to complement each other. That is why gender is not fluid in the eternities — because it provides the basis for the ultimate gift Heavenly Father can give, His kind of life.”¹⁸ For this reason, “throughout eternity, we will not be genderless, as some theologians have suggested.”¹⁹ It therefore makes no sense to speak of God the Father containing “all gender identities and anatomies” (p. 24).

Queering the Atonement

Similarly, Ostler takes true doctrine regarding the atonement and mixes in falsehoods to distort what Christ endured for us. It is true that Christ “suffer[ed] pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind” so that “he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities” (Alma 7:11–12). This necessarily includes the feelings and temptations experienced by those who identify as LGBTQ+. Ostler takes this a step further, however. Consistent with her pantheistic/panentheistic tendencies, Ostler declares that “a being who has known through personal experience all the world’s suffering, gendered or otherwise, becomes ‘They’” (p. 39). Therefore, Jesus “consciously became both male and female, cisgender and transgender, agender and pangender, black and white, strong and weak, heterosexual and homosexual” (p. 39). She further explains that she is “suggesting Jesus the Christ left Gethsemane queer” and that “the Atonement was a queer experience” (p. 39).

This is a massive logical fallacy. Jesus Christ experienced all of our struggles and pain. But this does not mean he became those things. It would similarly make no sense to call Jesus an alcoholic, a drug addict,

16. Elder David A. Bednar, “Marriage Is Essential to His Eternal Plan,” *Ensign* 36, no. 6 (June 2006), 83, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2006/06/marriage-is-essential-to-his-eternal-plan>.

17. “General Conference Leadership Meetings Begin,” https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/october-2019-general-conference-first-presidency-leadership-session?cid=HP_NWSRM_10_2_19.

18. Elder Dale G. Renlund and Sister Ruth Lybbert Renlund, “The Divine Purposes of Sexual Intimacy,” *Ensign* 50, no. 8 (August 2020), 16, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2020/08/the-divine-purposes-of-sexual-intimacy>.

19. *Ibid.*, 19n7.

or an adulterer even though he likely experienced all of those pains and temptations. Because of his perfect, sinless life and divine nature, Jesus was able to endure and overcome all of these things. As Paul stated in his epistle to the Hebrews, Christ “was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin” (Hebrews 4:15). As Elder Jeffrey R. Holland declared, “Jesus held on. He pressed on. The goodness in Him allowed faith to triumph even in a state of complete anguish.”²⁰ As a result, “Jesus clearly understood what many in our modern culture seem to forget: that there is a crucial difference between the commandment to forgive sin (which He had an infinite capacity to do) and the warning against condoning it (which He never ever did even once).”²¹

The Queer Church

For Ostler every single aspect of Church membership is viewed through the same distorted queer lens. Membership in the “body of Christ” requires us to become “queer in Christ” (p. 44). The sacrament becomes a “promise to take on Jesus’s queer experience in Gethsemane” (p. 44). This means “that we encompass a broad spectrum of genders, orientations, races, abilities, and experiences” and embrace “our collective queerness and peculiarity” (p. 44). Redeeming the dead becomes a call to fully embrace and celebrate individuals in their various proclivities and conditions such as “the trans woman in her fifties when she wears pink ‘Hello Kitty’ rainboots” (p. 48). Indeed, we must “raise them from the dead in all their queer celestial glory” (p. 48).

But this neglects a crucial part of our baptismal and temple covenants. Our covenants include the obligation to serve God and “keep his commandments, that he may pour out his Spirit more abundantly upon you” (Mosiah 18:10). Membership in the fold of Christ includes obedience to his commandments and abstaining from all manner of sin. It also requires close adherence to the teachings of inspired prophets — even if those prophets tell us things we don’t want to hear or don’t think we need to do. Hence, shortly after baptizing followers in the Waters of Mormon, Alma ordains priests and instructs them to “teach nothing save it were the things which he had taught, and which had been spoken

20. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland, “None Were with Him,” *Ensign* 39, no. 5 (May 2009), 88, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2009/05/none-were-with-him>.

21. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland, “The Cost — and Blessings — of Discipleship,” *Ensign* 44, no. 5 (May 2014), 8, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2014/05/saturday-morning-session/the-cost-and-blessings-of-discipleship>.

by the mouth of the holy prophets” (Mosiah 18:19). We do our brothers and sisters no service if we abandon sacred teachings and covenants in an ultimately futile effort to mourn with those who attempt to find happiness in sin. To the contrary, we have a covenantal obligation to offer a voice of warning, because “love demands warning people about what can hurt them.”²²

Blood Libel

Ostler is open about her disdain for the doctrines of the Church on human sexuality and the family. Indeed, she goes so far as to compare members of the Church to Pontius Pilate who “washed his hands as an innocent queer Jesus was put to death” (p. 40). According to Ostler, faithful members of the Church “have blood on our hands, and we cannot claim our innocence in the narrative when queer people across the globe are dying” (p. 40).

This blood libel is directly contrary to recent data suggesting that LGBTQ adolescents who are members of the Church experience far less suicidality than those who are not members of the Church.²³ And scholars have argued that “talking about suicide in inaccurate or exaggerated ways,” as Ostler does here, “can elevate that risk in vulnerable individuals.”²⁴

A Distorted Proclamation

A clear obstacle to Ostler’s vision of establishing a queer theology is *The Family: A Proclamation to the World*, issued by the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles in 1995. When President Hinckley introduced the Family Proclamation, he emphasized that the purpose of

22. Elder D. Todd Christofferson, “The Voice of Warning,” *Ensign* 47, no. 5 (May 2017), 47, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2017/05/sunday-afternoon-session/the-voice-of-warning>. Elder Christofferson was quoting Chris Stefanick, *Absolute Relativism: The New Dictatorship and What to Do about It* (El Cajon, CA: Catholic Answers Press, 2011), 33.

23. Walter Schumm, “Latter-day Saint LGBTQ Youths May Have Lower Suicide Risk, Two New Studies Suggest,” *Deseret News* (October 13, 2021), <https://www.deseret.com/opinion/2021/10/13/22672169/are-latter-day-saint-lgbtq-youths-less-suicidal-a-new-study-asks-the-question-mormon>.

24. Michael Goodman and Justin Dyer, “The Church and LGBT Youth Suicide: Inaccurate Claims May Do More Harm Than Good,” *Deseret News* (May 7, 2019), <https://www.deseret.com/2019/5/7/20672662/guest-opinion-the-church-and-lgbt-youth-suicide-inaccurate-claims-may-do-more-harm-than-good>.

the proclamation was to refute arguments regarding the nature of the family and human sexuality similar to that which Ostler makes:

With so much of sophistry that is passed off as truth, with so much of deception concerning standards and values, with so much of allurements and enticement to take on the slow stain of the world, we have felt to warn and forewarn. In furtherance of this we of the First Presidency and the Council of the Twelve Apostles now issue a proclamation to the Church and to the world as a declaration and reaffirmation of standards, doctrines, and practices relative to the family which the prophets, seers, and revelators of this church have repeatedly stated throughout its history.²⁵

How does Ostler reconcile her queer doctrine with the teachings of God's prophets? Ostler's take on the Family Proclamation is painful and textually incoherent. Ostler explicitly ignores the "history of its existence" as well as "the intentions of the authors of the document" (p. 52). Instead, she gravitates solely towards language that reads "Disability, death, or **other circumstances may necessitate individual adaptation**" (p. 53). She argues that "other circumstances could include a person who is gay" (p. 53) and that "there are many other types of marriages and families which are just as essential to God's plan, even if they aren't explicitly stated in the document" (p. 54). Ostler believes that this possibility is left open by the fact that "gay marriage simply isn't mentioned anywhere in the document" (p. 54).

This argument is deeply flawed on many levels. Most fundamentally, this argument fails on a textual level. "Other circumstances" immediately follows the specific examples of disability and death. This strongly implies that the more generalized language of "other circumstances" is best explained and limited by the preceding specific examples.²⁶ Specifically, these examples suggest an unexpected interruption that comes to an already established marriage. It therefore does not open the door for any and all circumstances one could imagine that fundamentally alter the nature of the relationship.

25. Gordon B. Hinckley, "Stand Strong against the Wiles of the World," *Ensign* 25, no. 11 (November 1995), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1995/11/stand-strong-against-the-wiles-of-the-world>.

26. For lawyers, this is a canon of construction known as *Ejusdem Generis*. See Antonin Scalia and Bryan A. Garner, *Reading Law: The Interpretation of Legal Texts* (St. Paul, MN: Thomson West, 2012), 199–214.

Furthermore, this language must be colored by the repeated proclamations that marriage “between a man and a woman is ordained of God” and “essential to His eternal plan.” The proclamation is explicit that “the sacred power of procreation are to be employed only between man and woman, lawfully wedded as husband and wife.” Even the “other circumstances” language is found specifically in the context of a discussion of the roles of fathers and mothers “in marriage.” Reading the “other circumstances” language as creating an exception that swallows the whole thrust of the document is deeply problematic and textually illogical.

This reading is even more implausible when you take a step back and consider the “history of its existence” and “the intentions of the authors of the document,” which Ostler admittedly does not do (p. 52). Ostler concedes that she does “not argue that [her] interpretation is what the authors of the document intended” (p. 54). But with a prophetic document — authored and signed by those sustained as prophets, seers, and revelators — these types of factors are paramount. After all, the apostle Peter explains that “no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation” (2 Peter 1:20). When God’s servants speak in unanimity, we should be particularly eager to understand “the intentions of the authors of the document” and the context in which they spoke. Otherwise, we are likely to impose our own biases and desires on the text, as Ostler aptly illustrates.

Looking at the context of the Family Proclamation and the authors’ intentions, it could not be more obvious that it does not support use by Ostler (or others similarly inclined) to adapt it to “other circumstances” by establishing or somehow sanctioning LGBTQ families. In the 15 years leading up to the Family Proclamation, Church leaders spoke out with a single voice against homosexual activity and homosexual marriages in particular.²⁷ For instance, in 1994, the First Presidency declared “the

27. See e.g., “The Church and the Proposed Equal Rights Amendment: A Moral Issue,” *Ensign* 10, no. 3 (March 1980), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1980/03/the-church-and-the-proposed-equal-rights-amendment-a-moral-issue>. The article warns that the Equal Rights Amendment “would carry with it the risk of extending constitutional protection to immoral same-sex — lesbian and homosexual — marriages” and result in “an increase in the practice of homosexual and lesbian activities, and other concepts which could alter the natural, God-given relationship of men and women.” Elder Boyd K. Packer stated, “The plan of happiness requires the righteous union of male and female, man and woman, husband and wife. ... Neither alone nor with other men could Adam progress. Nor could Eve with another woman. It was so then. It is so today.” (Elder Boyd K.

principles of the gospel and the sacred responsibilities given us require that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints oppose any efforts to give legal authorization to marriages between persons of the same gender.”²⁸ It is inconceivable that they would have written into the Family Proclamation an exception that would allow gay marriage when they had just “encourage[d] members to appeal to legislators, judges, and other government officials to preserve the purposes and sanctity of marriage between a man and a woman, and to reject all efforts to give legal authorization or other official approval or support to marriages between persons of the same gender.”²⁹ Ostler’s reading is simply a non-starter on many levels.

Ostler’s arguments regarding gender are even less convincing. The Family Proclamation declares that gender is “an essential characteristic of individual premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose.” This language is quite difficult to get around.³⁰

Ostler advances the popular argument that transgender individuals may have eternal genders that do not align with their bodies. This argument runs contrary to President Oaks’s explanation, which has been codified in the most recent Handbook of Instructions, that gender means “biological sex at birth.”³¹ It is nevertheless true that “some people

Packer, “For Time and All Eternity,” *Ensign* 23, no. 11 [November 1993], [https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1993/11/for-time-and-all-eternity.\)](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1993/11/for-time-and-all-eternity.) Elder Dallin H. Oaks explained, “We live in a day when there are many political, legal, and social pressures for changes that confuse gender and homogenize the differences between men and women. Our eternal perspective sets us against changes that alter those separate duties and privileges of men and women that are essential to accomplish the great plan of happiness.” (Elder Dallin H. Oaks, “The Great Plan of Happiness,” *Ensign* 23, no. 11 [November 1993], [https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1993/11/the-great-plan-of-happiness.\)](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1993/11/the-great-plan-of-happiness.)

28. “First Presidency Statement Opposing Same Gender Marriages,” (February 1, 1994), <https://abn.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1994/04/news-of-the-church/first-presidency-statement-opposing-same-gender-marriages.>

29. *Ibid.*

30. See also Marion G. Romney, “The Worth of Souls,” *Ensign* 8, no. 11 (November 1978), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1978/11/the-worth-of-souls.> Elder Romney stated “It is clear that man’s physical body is patterned after his spiritual body.”

31. “General Conference Leadership Meetings Begin,” https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/october-2019-general-conference-first-presidency-leadership-session?cid=HP_NWSRM_10_2_19. As one of the three members of the Quorum of the Twelve who sat on the original drafting committee for the Family Proclamation along with Elders Faust and Nelson, Oaks’s interpretation should be given added interpretive weight. Trevor Holyoak,

experience feelings of incongruence between their biological sex and their gender identity” and “the Church does not take a position on the causes of people identifying themselves as transgender.”³² Some of this incongruence may theoretically come as a result of living in a fallen world beset by genetic mutations. If so, then this rare condition may be an unusual exception that proves the rule that gender is an immortal characteristic.

Ostler is not content with this argument because she claims that “it does not address the needs of gender-variant and gender-fluid folks” (p. 55). Accordingly, she advances the head-scratching argument that “having an eternal gender does not mean an unchanged or static gender” and that “gender-variant, non-binary, and fluid gender identities are just as legitimate as fixed gender experiences” (p. 56).

But this cannot be squared with the Family Proclamation’s declaration that gender is an “essential characteristic” that gives an individual his “premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose.” If something repeatedly changes and remains fluid, then it is emphatically not “essential” and part of an “eternal identity.”³³

Ostler also argues that since Heavenly Father and Mother are united as one, they can best be described as “intersex” or non-binary (p. 57). Indeed, one “cannot become God without embracing God’s diverse morphology, including transgender, non-binary, genderqueer, intersex, gender variant, and especially gender-fluid folks like myself” (p. 58). Therefore, in Ostler’s view, it would be cruel to “limit a person to a particular gender expression when a person may prefer a fluid expression of their gender(s)” (p. 58). Ostler even goes so far as to analogize her own surgery for gender dysphoria to being “transfigured and crowned with glory” (p. 61). I have already responded to similar arguments above,

“Book Review: ‘In the Hands of the Lord: The Life of Dallin H. Oaks,’” *FAIR* (December 12, 2021), <https://www.fairlatterdaysaints.org/blog/2021/12/12/book-review-in-the-hands-of-the-lord-the-life-of-dallin-h-oaks>. See also *General Handbook: Serving in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* § 38.6.23: “the intended meaning of gender in the family proclamation is *biological sex at birth*,” https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/general-handbook/38-church-policies-and-guidelines?lang=eng#title_number118.

32. General Handbook § 38.6.23.

33. Greg Smith thoroughly discusses how Church leaders in the early twentieth century addressed the question of whether our spirits had a sex in the premortal existence, and all embraced the doctrine that “sex is an eternal principle” that has always existed either as part of our unformed intelligence or at the moment of spiritual creation. (Smith, “Feet of Clay,” 159.)

but it is worth briefly reiterating that Ostler's argument falls apart if our Heavenly Parents remain separate and distinct beings. This argument also once again fallaciously equates what is natural or feels good with what is ordained of God and inspired by the Spirit.

Confusing the Purpose of Sex

One of Ostler's last chapters deals with sexuality and creation. So much of this chapter depends on the distortions and errors that Ostler made in earlier chapters. For instance, a question such as "why shouldn't a woman who was assigned male aspire to motherhood if she decides it is her noblest work?" is not coherent unless one has fully embraced Ostler's theories and explanations of doctrine (p. 65–66).

The gist of Ostler's argument in this chapter is that since adaptive technologies now allow for children to be born in a variety of circumstances, there is no reason to assume that the union between man and woman offers any unique procreative value. For Ostler, "transgender folks have shown us that homosexual reproduction is already possible" (p. 67). Furthermore, the viability of adoption shows that "queer families created through adoption are just as godly as families created through biology" (p. 68).

In her effort to show that sex between man and a woman is not necessary, Ostler takes the stories of Adam and Eve and the birth of Jesus and turns them into stories of "queer creation" even going so far as to suggest that Adam may have been a trans man and Eve a trans woman (p. 69).

But none of these examples involve two men or two women independently creating the spirit or the body of another human being without the involvement of the other sex. As renowned Catholic scholars Robert P. George, Sherif Girgis, and Ryan T. Anderson argue,

Marriage is a comprehensive union of two sexually complementary persons who seal (consummate or complete) their relationship by the generative act — by the kind of activity that is by its nature fulfilled by the conception of a child. So marriage itself is oriented to and fulfilled by the bearing, rearing, and education of children. The procreative-type act distinctively seals or completes a procreative-type union."³⁴

34. Robert P. George, Sherif Girgis, and Ryan T. Anderson, "What is Marriage?," *Harvard Journal of Law and Public Policy* 34, no. 1 (Winter 2010), 256, <https://>

Moreover, the union between man and woman is divinely ordained as set out in the Family Proclamation and the scriptures. When employed between man and woman, “sexual relations are ‘one of the ultimate expressions of our divine nature.’”³⁵ This union “is not only a symbolic union between a husband and a wife — the very uniting of their souls — but it is also symbolic of a shared relationship between them and their Father in Heaven.”³⁶ It is “intended to mean the complete merger of a man and a woman — their hearts, hopes, lives, love, family, future, everything” and is “a union of such completeness that we use the word *seal* to convey its eternal promise.”³⁷ Whether two people of the same sex can use science to have a biological child, there is no reason to believe that the “blessings of eternal increase can be made available to all people if we so choose to embrace a theology” such as the one that Ostler fashions (p. 76). As prophets have made abundantly clear, the blessings of eternal increase are accessible only through the covenantal union of man and woman. Any other type of intimacy, even though it may have some good or positive attributes, does not serve the same purpose and is therefore not ordained as part of God’s plan.

It is similarly true that there are many good and virtuous families led by members of the LGBTQ+ communities and that these families can successfully raise children. But this does not change Church teachings that “a home with a loving and loyal husband and wife is the supreme setting in which children can be reared in love and righteousness and in which the spiritual and physical needs of children can be met.”³⁸ Nor does it show that these relationships have the same eternal potential. It is true that we do not have all the answers about what exaltation and eternal life will look like. But there is no indication in the scriptures or prophetic teachings that the doctrine that “neither is the woman without the man, nor the man without the woman” (1 Corinthians 11:11) is up for negotiation.

Queer Polygamy

Ostler’s final chapter envisions a celestial form of polygamy where “members are given the liberty to engage in plural sealings” with

papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1722155.

35. Renlund and Renlund, “The Divine Purposes of Sexual Intimacy,” 16.

36. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland, “Personal Purity,” *Ensign* 28, no. 11 (November 1998), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1998/11/personal-purity>.

37. *Ibid.*

38. Bednar, “Marriage is Essential to His Eternal Plan,” 84.

partners of their choosing (p. 78). Indeed, Ostler goes so far as to condemn those who advocate for the complete removal and disavowal of polygamy as “simply replacing one oppressive mandate with another” (p. 79). Her model of “*Queer Polygamy* ... encompasses the spirit of polygamy without mandating any specific marital relations” (p. 81) by allowing for “a potentially infinite number of marital, sexual, romantic, non-romantic, and celestial relationships” (p. 82). For Ostler, this is “the fulfillment of the all-inclusive breadth that Latter-day Saint theology has to offer” (p. 82) and includes the bonds between sisters, friends, and ward members.

Ostler once again mixes truth and falsehood in a way that might be deceptively persuasive. It is true that the Gospel values a wide variety of relationships, including familial and friendly bonds. Indeed, the same sociality that we experience here will exist in heaven (D&C 130:2), and we may sometimes shortchange the importance of these other relationships by focusing on marriage and the family. Nevertheless, there remains something unique about the intimate bond between husband and wife that cannot be replicated in other relationships. Ostler distorts God’s plan by attempting to treat all these different bonds as interchangeable.

As President Dallin H. Oaks teaches, there is much that we do not know “about conditions in the spirit world” and in fact we know “not as much as we often think”³⁹ It is therefore especially important that we stick closely to the divine truths that have been revealed, including “the family proclamation, signed by all 15 prophets, seers, and revelators.”⁴⁰ Ostler’s speculative vision of eternal polygamy goes far afield from what has been revealed regarding the eternal nature of the bond between a man and a woman.

Conclusion

I fear that some people will be seduced by the smooth and popular theology of Ostler’s book and will be moved away from the foundation of orthodoxy as expressed by prophets, seers, and revelators through inspired documents, including the standard works, the Living Christ, the Family Proclamation, and the Restoration Proclamation. Wittingly unmoored from these foundational pillars, Ostler walks “after the image of [her] own god whose image is in the likeness of the world” (D&C 1:16). Unfortunately, the God she urges readers to follow in her

39. President Dallin H. Oaks, “Trust in the Lord,” *Ensign* 49, no. 11 (November 2019), 26, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2019/11/17oaks>.

40. *Ibid.*, 28.

proposed theology is not the loving Heavenly Father manifest in latter-day revelations but is instead a pantheistic/panentheistic “idol ... which shall fall” (D&C 1:16).

I have no doubt that *Queer Mormon Theology* will, unfortunately, lead some people away from Christ’s church. The false doctrines contained therein may be pleasing by the world’s standard of sexual morality, but they lead to spiritual death and damnation rather than eternal life and exaltation.

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