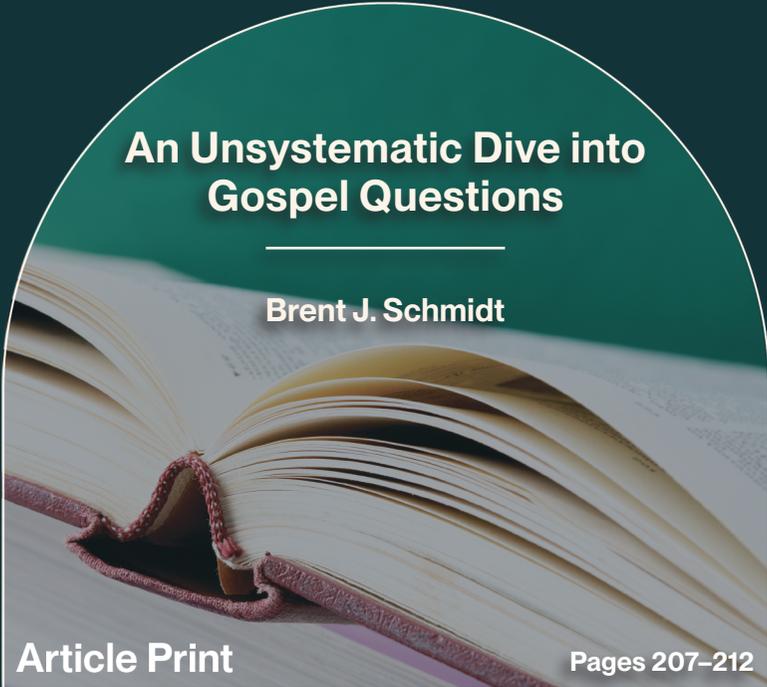


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An Unsystematic Dive into Gospel Questions

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An Unsystematic Dive into Gospel Questions

Brent J. Schmidt

Review of Michael Hawkins, Infinite Contingencies: Insights on Latter-day Saint Doctrine and Practice (Springville, UT: Cedar Fort, 2025). 120 pages. \$16.99 (paperback).

Abstract: *A recent book by Michael Hawkins provides subjective answers to timeless gospel questions and practices. Some readers will enjoy its novel approach and will gain insights that will help them live and apply the Restored gospel. Its unsystematic and lay approach, however, is neither apologetic nor scholarly.*

Michael Hawkins's recent work, *Infinite Contingencies*,¹ begins with an autobiographical preface about being rattled as a teenager by a wise humanities instructor's many anti-Mormon talking points based on Bible proof-texts. Because of this harrowing experience, Hawkins encourages those readers who may be over-confident about their doctrinal knowledge to seek a deeper understanding of doctrine so they are able to face such "gale-force winds of opposition" (p. xi). Hawkins hints that his own journey to understand the restored gospel will help others "on their own paths of gospel learning" (p. xi).

Many readers may anticipate well-crafted, apologetic responses to specific critiques of the Restoration in this short book, but what follows are mostly simple and disjointed musings about diverse, unrelated, and unsettled Church doctrines accompanied by four short chapters with application-type suggestions.

1. Michael Hawkins, *Infinite Contingencies: Insights on Latter-day Saint Doctrine and Practice* (Springville, UT: Cedar Fort, 2025).

This work has many strengths and some glaring weaknesses. Hawkins writes well; takes a humble, practical approach to each subject; and attempts to explain gospel principles in a faithful way. His original take on some doctrinal topics will appeal to many readers. He also succeeds at clustering relevant scripture and mostly older prophetic quotes to address significant doctrinal topics. However, his academic studies in modern Philippino history does not grant him the ability to deeply explain the linguistic, cultural, philosophical, or historical milieu of the many biblical passages he clusters. Much of the book only exhibits mature but very subjective gospel-based reflection instead of scholarly scriptural discoveries or compelling apologetic material. Yet, Hawkins provides some insights that will assist some readers to consider challenging doctrinal topics from different angles.

Ten chapters discuss doctrinal topics widely ranging from an overview of the gathering of Israel to translation theory, paradoxical transgressions, charity, popular parables, generational struggles, and problems related to perfection, the existence of evil, and relative notions of fairness. Each doctrinal topic is generally evaluated on its own instead of exploring how they may be related as a whole. The diversity of doctrines presented may cause some readers to experience a form of logical whiplash.

Chapters about perfectionism and theodicy² are the longest and most original of the ten doctrinal chapters, and so they are analyzed further in this review.

Perfection

All who are striving to become better disciples must confront the spiritual pitfalls of perfectionism. Hawkins correctly explains that one must be perfect in Christ by quoting Moroni 10:32 which alleviates potential “anxiety, fatigue, or disillusionment with the gospel” (p. 5). However, Hawkins does not acknowledge that the opposite extreme of spiritual complacency commonly found in some Protestant circles inhibits individuals from properly utilizing their agency by Christian discipleship and covenant keeping. Choosing to receive God’s gifts (grace) naturally motivates action and consistently empowers Saints. A covenant relationship with Heavenly Father through his son, Jesus Christ, gradually inspires soul-enlarging discipleship instead of prideful perfectionism, points that Hawkins neglects to make. While many

2. The term *theodicy* is Greek, meaning “the righteousness of God.”

Bible commentaries certainly attempt to "lessen the severity of Matthew 5:48" (p. 3), Hawkins neglects to note that the Joseph Smith Translation of this verse reads, "Ye are therefore *commanded to be perfect*," indicating that something obvious must be missing from his analysis of this problem.

When the resurrected Christ visited the Americas, he included himself as being perfect like our Father: "Therefore I would that ye should be perfect even as I, or your Father who is in heaven is perfect" (3 Nephi 12:48). In comparing the Matthew verse with the 3 Nephi rendition, it seems clear that the resurrection is related to becoming perfect. Then-Elder Nelson taught that the "resurrection is requisite for eternal perfection."³

Besides meaning *complete* or *perfect*, the ancient Greek word for *perfection* found in Matthew 5:48 (*teleios*) also describes Gentiles who had been initiated into temple rituals. These rituals included gaining knowledge and information that would allow them to go through the veil, becoming gods and enjoying a resurrected, glorious afterlife.⁴ Thus, *teleios* may mean those who will receive the blessings of the endowment. Hawkins missed an opportunity to describe how striving for perfection in Christ entails a gradual journey of repentance along Jesus's covenant path through priesthood ordinances. Perfection in the form of a celestial bodily resurrection results from faithfully making and keeping temple covenants.

Theodicy

Hawkins addressed the ageless topic of the existence of a just God in a fallen world (theodicy) in novel ways. He categorizes the question of the nature of God as the *Euthyphro dilemma* (p. 47). However, no background is provided about Plato's dialogue known as the *Euthyphro* (10a) in which Socrates asks the famous question "Is that which is holy loved by the gods because it is holy, or is it holy because it is loved by the gods?"⁵ Hawkins avoids answering this simple Greek binary question, though a direct answer would be much easier for the reader

3. Russell M. Nelson, "Perfection Pending," *Ensign* (November 1995), churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1995/11/perfection-pending.

4. For further on this concept, see Plato, *Republic* 363c, 364e; *Phaedrus* 249c; Brent J. Schmidt, "Temple Elements in Ancient Religious Communities," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 50, no. 1 (2011): 132, byustudies.byu.edu/article/temple-elements-in-ancient-religious-communities.

5. Translation by the author from Greek from Plato, *Euthyphro* (10a), www.perseus

to follow than the distorted and subjective modern interpretations of it. Hawkins points to the German philosopher Gottfried Leibniz who “distilled Socrates’s query down to a single binary question of ‘whether [a thing] is good and just because God wills it or whether God wills it because it is good and just” (p. 47).

Hawkins then poses a series of questions about theodicy. The questions tend to focus on what has not been definitively revealed about God’s nature. His characterization of ancient Greek and Roman gods as not acting according to standards of cosmic mortality but only according to their absolute will (p. 48) is only one of many possible interpretations of Greco-Roman religious beliefs.

Hawkins argues that Heavenly Father chooses to benevolently live within universal law instead of creating it out of nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*) as asserted in creedal Christianity. Hawkins musters scripture and prophetic quotes under the headings of the unity of opposites, existential bounds, eternal progress, and the necessity of an Atonement to support his assertive thesis that God is “bound by laws and forces” which only “greatly elevates him” (p. 57). He concludes this chapter by explaining that humankind must “adhere to divine principles and live according to the same laws of eternal goodness” (p. 58).

Hawkins seems unaware that some scripture and prophetic statements do not support his conclusions about the eternal nature of law. In a helpful *BYU Studies* article, James McLachlan provides a thorough and robust treatment of this particular subject that would have greatly informed the conclusions of the chapter.⁶ In contrast to a dogmatic approach, McLachlan leaves open the possibility that God created law, a possibility that renders Hawkins’s insights about God’s nature too one-sided. Joseph Smith’s statement in the King Follett discourse about the reason God instituted laws teaches God may have created law:

The first principles of man are self existent with God; that God himself finds himself in the midst of spirits and glory, because he was greater, and because he saw proper to institute *laws*, whereby the rest could have a privilege to advance like himself, that they might have one glory upon

.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0170%3Atext%3D Euthyph.%3Asection%3D10a

6. James McLachlan, “Is God Subject to or the Creator of Eternal Law?,” *BYU Studies* 60, no. 3 (2021), byustudies.byu.edu/article/is-god-subject-to-or-the-creator-of-eternal-law.

another, in all that knowledge, power, and glory, &c., in order to save the world of spirits.⁷

Unfortunately, Hawkins’s doctrinal question about God following or creating eternal law remains unsettled at the end of the day. In general, it seems that Restoration scripture is much more focused on each individual’s personal responsibility to abide God’s law than on God’s responsibility to abide law of unspecified and unrevealed origin. Throughout the Old Testament, God is known as the Almighty, but in latter-day scripture he is also described as a *lawmaker* or *lawgiver* (Doctrine and Covenants 29:30–35; 38:1–3; 76:3–4, 12–13; 88:11–13, 36–43; 121:29–32). Such references focus on humankind’s need to follow God’s word or law rather than a “need” for God to follow something independent of him.

Discipleship centered on obedience to God’s laws is much more spiritually profitable than speculation about the ultimate origin of God’s law. To his credit, Hawkins acknowledges that asking and answering the right questions is what really matters (p. 112).

Conclusion

In conclusion, Hawkins’s treatment of many challenging doctrines has at least motivated this reader to ponder them further, which can be considered an accomplishment of the author’s goal.



Brent J. Schmidt teaches at Brigham Young University—Idaho in the religion and humanities departments. He earned degrees in history and classics from the University of Utah and a PhD in classics from the University of Colorado—Boulder. He is an editor and author of the BYU New Testament Commentary series. He has written books about Greek words conventionally translated as faith and grace. He enjoys studying ancient and modern languages, gardening, and travelling. He reads one academic book a day.

7. “Conference Minutes,” *Times and Seasons*, 15 August 1844, 615, emphasis added, josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-7-april-1844-as-published-in-times-and-seasons/4

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