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Looking at the Endowment and Atonement Through a Different Lens

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LOOKING AT THE ENDOWMENT AND ATONEMENT THROUGH A DIFFERENT LENS

Gaye Strathearn

A review of Blake T. Ostler, *Fire on the Horizon: A Meditation on the Endowment and Love of Atonement*. Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2013, 119 pages + subject and scripture indices.

The author, Blake T. Ostler, describes his book as “a meditation on the endowment presented in the temple” (p. ix). In doing so, he is careful to focus his discussion on the scriptural texts in Genesis and Moses and on published material of early church leaders, particularly that of the Prophet Joseph. But readers should know that this book is not an exegetical discussion, understanding the endowment in its original context (i.e., understanding the scriptural passages in their Genesis, Moses, or temple contexts). Rather, it is an attempt to make sense of aspects of the creation accounts from the author’s particular philosophical and experiential perspective. In doing so, it is an invitation for all to think deeply about the Atonement and our relations with Christ and with one another. This approach is valuable. It is a call to ask questions about things that, if we’re not careful, can become so repetitious that they become commonplace. The book is organized around an introduction and two major parts: Part One, Atonement and the Sacred *Thou* at the Center of Joseph Smith’s Revelations; and Part Two, The Heart of Atonement.

In his introduction, Ostler sets up the metaphors that undergird his philosophical approach to spiritual knowledge. It is an invitation to see spiritual knowledge about the endowment and the Atonement from a perspective that the author likens, on the one hand, to a fire *on the horizon*. Even though the horizon is a constant — it is always there — it is also “a matter

of perspective from where one stands. It changes depending upon one's movement" (p. vii). So also, according to the author, is spiritual knowledge. He argues that spiritual knowledge can change according to where we stand on our spiritual journey and, from the perspective of Immanuel Kant, according to our experiences. But the question that immediately surfaces in my mind is whether it is actually spiritual knowledge that changes or *our understanding* of spiritual knowledge that changes. This is an important distinction the author alludes to but doesn't address directly. At stake is the larger question of whether knowledge is absolute or relative.

In addition, spiritual knowledge can also be described as a *fire*. "The horizon is the edge of the world. Yet a fire on the horizon is something more. The fire on the horizon may be a dangerous messenger that we must heed. The fire on the horizon illuminates not merely where the horizon is located, but also portends an immense power to which we must pay attention. If we fail to do so, we may get burned" (p. vii). Drawing further on the work of Kant and Kierkegaard, Ostler argues that knowledge comes from the collective experience of the community and also from our own personal experience. However,

knowledge conveyed by the spirit is an existential communication — a knowledge that communicates with and to our very being. What we know is imbedded within our very existence as an individual. We can only escape such knowledge through an act of hiding what we know from ourselves in an act of self-deception (p. ix).

The author also likens spiritual knowledge to our *eye lenses* that enable us to see: although we have them and we know that we have them,

they remain hidden from what we see. It is given to us; yet we cannot see it or experience it directly. We can write and speak about it; but we cannot simply convey such knowledge to another. One's own

spiritual knowledge is always beyond the horizon of any other person (p. ix).

[Thus,] spiritual knowledge is a burning fire within. With spiritual experience, the horizon is our own hearts — the center of our being. It may be beyond the horizon of human discursive expression, but it is a power that must be heeded (p. ix).

All of this explanation is preamble for the basic issues that Ostler wants us to consider. The Atonement is real and eternal, but our understanding of it is forged by a perspective that is often unique and can change according to where a person stands. This book is a call to deepen our understanding of the Atonement and the endowment by studying it from a different perspective. It is a call to ask questions: “Why is it done that way, why is it said in that strange way, why do we do it that way, and what does it mean about how I am doing it right now?” These types of questions can help us avoid falling into a trap of complacency and, in the process, see things that we might not have seen before. As Ostler himself asked these questions, “What was revealed was almost nothing about the endowment per se, but about the status of my own heart and my ways of being in the world.” Thus he argues that

the Atonement is the fire on the horizon that reveals the limits of what we can access, illuminates what is otherwise beyond us, warns us of what we must be aware of, and calls us to heed its gift and warns of the dangers of not doing so (p. xi).

The chapters in Part 1 are based on Immanuel Kant’s and Martin Buber’s use of the “Holy Thou.”¹ Basically, the *Holy Thou* understands that in a relationship individuals are not “mere

1 Immanuel Kant, *The Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals in Kant’s Theory of Ethics*, trans. T.K. Abbott (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1879); Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1937).

means (objects), but always as ends in and of themselves.” The opposite of a *Holy Thou* is an *It*, a thing, or an object to be used. “In an *I-It* relationship, there is no genuine reciprocity. The relationship is similar to that of a manipulator to an instrument, of mechanic to an engine, or computer scientist to computer” (p. 7). In contrast, in an *I-Thou* relationship, a person engages

one’s intrinsic being in direct and sympathetic contact with another intrinsic being. The *Thou* is cherished and valued as an individual — not as a means but as an end, nor for what *It* can do for me, but valued intrinsically as a person. The *I-Thou* relation is thus necessarily reciprocal. To approach a *Thou* is to be constituted as a *Thou* in the relationship. In such a relationship, *I* not only give but receive; *I* not only speak but also listen; *I* not only respond but also invite response; *I* not only value but also am valued. Only in such a relationship where soul truly mingles with the soul of another *Thou* are persons constituted as persons. The relationship creates us in its image (p. 8).

Ostler argues that only through the lens of the *I-Thou* relationship can we understand the divine-human relationship and the associated rituals. Thus sacred rituals cannot be understood by outsiders because they neither understand nor participate in the *I-Thou* relationship.

Ostler includes four short chapters to discuss how understanding the *I-Thou* relationship can be helpful in comprehending specific theological scenarios: “The Divine Risk of Love,” “The Peer Relationship as Christology,” “Zion as the Sacred Society Reflecting Divine Love,” and “Human Sacrifice, Plural Marriage, and the *I-Thou* Relation.” For me, most intriguing of these chapters was the last one, which employs two topics that are often difficult for modern readers to understand. The author compares God’s command for Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac with God’s command to Joseph Smith to institute plural marriage. Both commandments seem to put God at odds

with modern senses of morality. Ostler poses the rhetorical question, “Why would willingness to sacrifice one’s own son, or to be unfaithful one’s own spouse, lead to eternal life with God? Murder and adultery lead to damnation — surely not eternal life” (p. 37). The author uses intentionally provocative rhetoric to draw readers into the timeless philosophical debate on the nature of God. Specifically, to what extent is our understanding of God influenced by our own experience.

In antiquity, for example, the fifth century BC Greek philosopher and theologian Xenophanes once argued that the divine world was simply an extension of the human world:

14. But mortals think that gods are born and that they have their own clothing, voice and body 15. but if the oxen <and horses> or lions had hands or could draw with hands and finish works as men do, on the one hand both horses would draw pictures of gods like horses and, on the other hand, oxen would draw pictures of gods like oxen and make their bodies just like those bodies <each one> has. 16. Ethiopians say that their own gods have flat noses and black hair and the Thracians that they have grey eyes and red hair.²

The modern counterpart focuses not on the question of what God physically looks like but on what is God’s sense of morality, justice, and love. Ostler argues that the commandments given to both Abraham and Joseph Smith initiated an environment in which they could come to know God divested of any and all preconceptions of him.

Only in this way could they encounter God without prior judgments, without expectations, and without imposing their beliefs and demands on God. They were forced to let go of every presupposition, forget everything that they thought they knew, and

2 Xenophanes, frag. 14–16 in Hermann Diels, *Die Fragmente Der Vorsokratiker* (Berlin: Weidmannsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1960), 132–33.

suspend every notion about how and what God must be to be God — and simply to encounter God as He is, as He reveals Himself (p. 37).

The purpose is to invite people to enter into an *I-Thou* relationship with God that is not based on past experience but is based on trust in God.

Only when we are willing to let go of all of our moral schemata, only when we do not judge before we encounter [God] can we truly encounter God as He is — as He reveals Himself. God can be encountered as a *Thou* only when we give up our will to think we know before we know God. Knowing about God and what He must be is different than ‘knowing’ God God is not an object among other objects to be categorized and manipulated — He is a holy *Thou* to be encountered (p. 40).

In Part 2, Ostler explores the question of how we become the children of God. To be sure, we come into this life having the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26–27), “yet the likeness is not a fully mature image of God: they lack a fullness of mastery over themselves and the world that God possesses. They are like children who will grow into the stature of their parents but lack the experiences essential to be like God” (p. 56). The author returns again to the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden to develop his meditations. Additional sub-questions that he asks are: how can we become as God when we have broken our relationship with him by hiding from him and being cast out of his presence? How does the interplay between freedom, agency, and accountability provide an environment to develop what he calls “authentic relations” with God? Ostler defines authentic relations as ones that are chosen (p. 72). It is the *I-Thou* relationship developed in Part 1. In contrast, “an unauthentic existence” is one that is created from a “chain of causes” (p. 77): I am this way because a series of events led me to this point. This is the *I-It* relationship. How does the

Atonement heal the broken relationship between us and God and return us to the *I-Thou* relation?

In setting up this philosophical paradox between authentic and inauthentic relationships, the author invites his readers to *own* the story of Adam and Eve — not just to see it as a biblical story belonging to a distant past but rather to recognize that we are all heirs of Adam and Eve and that their story is our story. We, like Adam and Eve, all experience times when we have to choose whether or not to partake of “forbidden fruit” — decisions with difficult consequences that nevertheless provide important opportunities for growth. We all experience the cherubim’s sword that requires that we move forward instead of returning to the past. Likewise, we “are all tempted to hide from ourselves and from our accountability for our freedom to act” (p. 72). As Adam and Eve’s heirs, we also choose to leave God’s presence. The question thus becomes, “once having left Eden, how do I get past the cherubim with the sword to enter back into God’s presence?” (p. 72). Just as it is a choice to leave, so also it must be a choice to return. However, that choice to return cannot be motivated by fear or obligation; it can be truly motivated only by love. “It is by experiencing all of life that we can turn to taste the Tree [of Life’s] tender mercies that have given us the opportunity to learn to love unconditionally”(p. 64).

The author returns to the work of Kant and Buber to flush out his meditations. Once removed from Eden, Adam and Eve and their heirs choose either to “‘encounter’ the world in its wholeness (holiness)” or choose to experience it (p. 74). Readers should beware that this discussion is philosophically dense and difficult to process for the philosophical novice. The point of the discussion is to give a justification for Paul’s teaching that “the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Corinthians 2:14). When Adam and Eve chose to hide from God’s presence, they chose a path that led to mortality, which the author characterizes as “the world of things” — a world where ideas,

people, and spiritual experiences are judged by past and present experience, and outcomes are viewed as the “effect in a chain of causes” (p. 77). This event of leaving Eden is something that recurs throughout mortality. The reality is that “we all leave the Eden of the *I-Thou* relation and enter the world of *I-It* relations over and over again” (p. 80).

The final five chapters are the culmination of Ostler’s meditations. In these chapters he unpacks the way the Atonement heals the severed relationship with God. For me, these chapters are where the reader hits the paydirt of the book as Ostler discusses the Atonement and the Sacrament. Getting to them is worth wading through the dense philosophical discussions. Ostler argues that the *I-Thou* relation is one in which we trust God enough to open our hearts to him and begin to see ourselves as God sees us rather than as the world has conditioned us (pp. 86–87). It is a trust that enables us to become spiritually vulnerable and thus open our hearts “so that the word of God can penetrate” (p. 88). Thus, “life is set up so that God’s presence and existence are only detectable by those who have eyes to see and ears to hear the subtle signs of His loving overtures” (p. 82). It is a trust that, through the Atonement, allows us to recognize that we can be justified in God’s sight. It is a trust that enables the barriers to be removed, which allows God’s indwelling in us: “we give ourselves to be in him [Christ] and he gives himself to be in us” (p. 107). It is this reciprocity that is at the core of an *I-Thou* relationship.

Ostler continues with a short chapter on the Sacrament, which he discusses as the ritual re-creation of Christ’s indwelling. By partaking of the emblems of the Sacrament, we partake of Christ’s divinity. Eating and drinking of that divinity provide divine nourishment to empower and sustain spiritual life. Although Ostler relies mainly on Luke’s account of the Sacrament (Luke 22:19), his argument would be strengthened by John’s Bread of Life sermon, which acts as the Johannine sacramental chapter:

I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for

ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world. The Jews therefore strove among themselves, saying, How can this man give us his flesh to eat? Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you. Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him. As the living Father hath sent me, and I live by the Father: so he that eateth me, even he shall live by me. This is that bread which came down from heaven: not as your fathers did eat manna, and are dead: he that eateth of this bread shall live forever. (John 6:51–58)

Ostler returns to the major focus of Part 2: being the children of God. “We began life made in the image of God already as sons and daughters of God, and yet our challenge is to *become* sons and daughters of God. How can we become what we already are?” (emphasis in original; p. 118). “Jesus’s challenge is twofold: We are challenged to be what we already are. If we are sons and daughters of God, then we are already gods in the process of growth,” and we must act like it by seeing the divine in those around us, by manifesting God’s love.

We are also challenged to become what we are not yet fully. Children become what their parents are. We already have the divine life breathed into us at birth, yet the challenge is to breathe that divine spirit into a new birth . . . we are now asked to stand in a new kind of relationship with God where he adopts us as sons and daughters (p. 118).

Overall, I think that this book is a valuable work. I see real value in asking readers to reevaluate what they think they know and invite them to see through different lenses, especially on subjects that are very familiar. Ostler has powerfully

accomplished this invitation. But there are some areas where, in my opinion, the author struggles to nail down his delivery. For example, by identifying his work as a “meditation,” the author acknowledges that his hermeneutical approach is not an *exegetical* analysis, but rather an *eisegetical* reflection on the application of scriptural texts and ideas. But even so, the author clearly wants to approach his meditation from an academic perspective and combine scholarly analysis with application. At times this works, but at times there are inconsistencies. Let me give just three examples of the difficulties.

First, the author creates the feel of a rigorous academic approach by footnoting the philosophical works of Kant, Buber, Kierkegaard, and others. These citations are helpful; they provide important opportunities for readers to check the author’s summaries and interpretations. But at other times, especially in reference to the teachings of Joseph Smith, Ostler sometimes uses broad sweeping statements like “According to Joseph Smith we have all made the same choice as Adam and Eve” (p. 56) without any supporting citation to give precision and legitimacy to his point (see also pp. 48, 50, 84).

Second, on a number of occasions, Ostler quotes from the *Lectures on Faith* to support his discussion. On three of those occasions, he directly claims Joseph Smith’s authorship for the statements (pp. 1–2, 4–6),³ while on other occasions he makes no such claim (pp. 2, 20–21). The difficulty is that when he quotes the *Lectures*, he does not acknowledge, even in a footnote, that there is a significant debate about the authorship of the *Lectures on Faith* and Joseph Smith’s role in the producing of these lectures.⁴

3 The example on pages 1–2 is not explicit, but it concludes a paragraph here the author was discussing Joseph Smith’s teachings of the indwelling union between the Father and the Son.

4 See for example, Alan J. Phipps, “The Lectures on Faith: An Authorship study,” Masters thesis, Brigham Young University, 1977. Larry E. Dahl, “Authorship and History of the Lectures on Faith,” in *The Lectures on Faith in Historical Perspective*, ed. Larry E. Dahl and Charles D. Tate, Jr. (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1990), 1–21. Noel B.

Third, and perhaps most telling, are the places where Ostler turns to Hebrew and Greek words to inform his discussion. In the Hebrew texts, most pointing for the vowels is incorrect. While the example on page 48 for Eve is accurate, the Hebrew word for life is missing a *qāmeṣ* under the yod (י), and on page 49, the Hebrew word for spirit (*ruakh*)⁵ should be רוּחַ rather than רִיחַ. The problem is compounded in the Hebrew text on page 83 where pointing for the Hebrew word “which means to ‘plan or devise’” should be תַּשֵּׁב rather than תַּשֶּׁב. In addition, there are a number of problems with the Hebrew quotation of Genesis 6:5 (p. 83). The vowel pointing for every word has problems; the Hebrew word for “every” (כָּל) has been omitted; the letters have been transposed in the first word and should read יִצַּר instead of יִרְצִי; in the second word (מַחֲשַׁבֶּת), the letter *sin* (שׁ) has incorrectly been used instead of a *shin* (שׁ); and in the third word, the short *hiriq* (ִ) should be under the *lamed* (ל) and not under the *bet* (ב). To be fair, printing a Hebrew text (which goes from right to left) in a Western press can be very difficult, but when any changes are made to a text, it is the responsibility of both the printer and the author to be diligent in checking if those changes have had any impact on the Hebrew text. Even more problematical is the author’s use of שָׁהָם as the Hebrew word for repentance (p. 69). Even if the letters have mistakenly been transposed, it is still problematic. The Hebrew word “to return, turn back or repent” is שׁוּב (*shuv*; see for example, 1 Kings 8:33, 48).

The difficulties using ancient languages continue in the author’s use of Greek texts. He is inconsistent in his use of accents. Some of this is because the quotations that he uses omit them, but even in the author’s general discussion,

Reynolds, “Case for Sidney Rigdon as Author of the Lectures on Faith,” *Journal of Mormon History* 31/2 (Fall 2005): 1–41.

5 In this instance, my transliteration differs from that used by Ostler. I am using the standard scholarly style found in *The SBL Handbook of Style For Ancient Near Eastern, Biblical, and Early Christian Studies*, ed. Patrick H. Alexander, John F. Kutsko, James D. Ernest, Shirley A. Decker-Lucke, and David L. Peterson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007), 25–29. See also p. 83 where the standard transliteration of the *tsere* in לֵב would be *leb*, rather than *lib*.

sometimes he includes the accent in ἄφεσις (*aphesis*) on page 41 but omits it in πνεῦμα (*pneuma*) on page 49. Sometimes the inconsistency is even in the same paragraph: γνῶσις (*gnōsis*) and γινώσχω (*ginōschō*) on page 15. Sometimes the Greek spelling is also incorrect: ἐπιστημαί (*epistēmai*) instead of ἐπίσταμαι (*epistamai*; p. 15). The inconsistency also extends to whether the Greek should be included in the discussion. For example, while it is included in the discussion on *knowledge* (p. 15), the Greek words are omitted in the discussion of *seeing* on page 112. Here he notes, “There are actually five verbs in Greek that mean ‘to see.’ In the writings of John, ‘to see’ almost always means to see both with mortal eyes and with insight or eyes of understanding.” He then quotes John 6:40; 1:39, 45–46. What the author does not indicate here is that the references in John 1 use *horaō* (ὁράω) as the Greek word for *seeing*, whereas John 6:40 uses *theōpeō* (θεωπέω).

To be sure, unless one is trained in Hebrew and Greek, these difficulties will be oblivious to most readers. But for the trained eye, they stand out immediately. With the difficulties of using ancient texts, one wonders why the author felt the need to include them. For the most part, with perhaps the exception of the use of the Hebrew word for *word/repentance*, they are not needed in texts where a transcription could have sufficed.

Conclusion

It is clear that the author has thought deeply about the Atonement and the temple. He has a perceptive mind, and there is much food for thought in the book. However, for the philosophical layperson, Ostler’s work is, at times, heavy going, and thus the casual reader may struggle with it. But, for the most part, the chapters are small (the longest being 16 pages), so even the more difficult philosophical discussions can be manageable for the committed reader. This is a book that needs to be read over and over. My experience is that each time I did so, new insights came to the fore, and as a result, I will now look at the Garden of Eden stories and the Atonement through a different lens.

Gaye Strathearn was born and raised in Australia. She participated in the Jerusalem Study Abroad in Fall 1987 and came to Brigham Young University as a student in 1989, where she earned a BA and MA in Near Eastern Studies. She received a PhD in New Testament at the Claremont Graduate University. Her areas of expertise are New Testament and Christian Origins. Her areas of research are the bridal chamber ritual in Gnosticism, the life and teachings of Paul, and the gospel of Matthew. She is currently teaching at the BYU Jerusalem Center.

