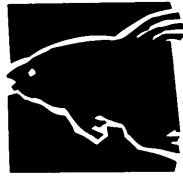

REVIEWS

SPECULATION, MYTH, AND UNFULFILLED EXPECTATIONS

STRANGERS IN PARADOX:
EXPLORATIONS IN MORMON THEOLOGY

by Paul James Toscano and Margaret Merrill Toscano
Signature Books, 1990, 301 Pages, Paperback \$12.95



Reviewed by Blake T. Ostler

STRANGERS IN PARADOX represents an attempt to recreate Mormonism in the image of Margaret and Paul Toscanos' interesting but off-beat pop psycho-theo-mythology. The book is divided into five principle sections. The first section, "First Principles," deals with the presence of paradox in Mormon Christian thought and suggests seven principles of interpreting scripture and basic hermeneutics. The second section, "The Godhead," treats the Toscanos' views of the pantheon of deities consisting of Mother, Father, Son and Daughter (Spirit) which the Toscanos assert constitute the Godhead in Mormon thought. The third section, "Redemption," presents the Toscanos' views on soteriology or the theory of salvation. The fourth section, "Priesthood," argues that women should be granted the Mormon priesthood. The fifth section, "Sex Roles, Marriage Patterns, and the Temple," treats the relations of the sexes in theology.

The Toscanos' effort ranges from feminist theology and myth-criticism to basic discourse on the meaning of scriptures. They raise so many philosophical, theological, and political issues that it would be impossible to competently address them in the short space of a book review. While I would dearly like

to critique the Toscanos' attempt to drag paradox into Mormonism, I will instead discuss four areas, focusing primarily on doctrinal innovations attempted by the Toscanos.

The Toscanos argue that Mormons are mistaken to regard God the Father as our God and Father. "Christ's God and father is not our God and father except through Christ, our intercessor. . . . Our God and Father is Jesus" (64). The Toscanos rely almost exclusively on the Book of Mormon to support their argument. They downplay and all but ignore later developments in Mormon thought which emphasize that Christ's Father is the Father of both Christ's and our premortal spirits (65). Nevertheless, I believe that their reliance on the Book of Mormon is somewhat justified. For it seems to me that the Book of Mormon indeed teaches that Christ is both Son and Father in a very strong modalistic sense. (Modalism is the doctrine that the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are merely different or roles undertaken by the one person who is God.) However, the Toscanos do not assert that the modalism presented in the Book of Mormon is the proper Mormon view; rather, they claim that God the Father is merely in the background and Jesus is the only God with whom we have to do: "What the Book of Mormon proclaims more clearly than any other book of scripture is that Jesus is our Heavenly Father" (64).

However, modalism is not the only view

taught in the Book of Mormon and certainly not the only view taught in Mormon scripture or in the developed thought of Joseph Smith and later Mormon prophets. Indeed, Mormon prophets after Brigham Young just don't seem to count in the Toscanos' book. The Book of Mormon also teaches, primarily in 3 Nephi, a social view of God where Christ is seen as a separate being from the Father who leads the Nephites to a direct relationship with his Father. After all, Jesus taught the Nephites in 3 Nephi to pray directly to and worship his God and his Father. Further, Joseph Smith taught in his later revelations that Jesus is our older brother in the premortal life who leads us to share his relationship directly with God the Father—the Father whom he worshipped and to whom he prayed and to whom "all glory is due."

My primary concern about the Toscanos' doctrine, however, is the violence it does to the real Jesus of Nazareth, the historical man who walked around the Palestinian countryside. I believe that the historical Jesus would be shocked at the Toscanos' suggestion that we should worship him directly as our father but not the one whom Jesus called "abba"—Father. Jesus of Nazareth even refused to let others put him in the same category as his Father, for there is none good but one, and that is the Father (Mark 10:18, Matthew 19:17, Luke 18:19). This Jesus, the real Jesus of history, is all but ignored by the Toscanos. Jesus emphasized the intimate and personal relation we should have with his Father, and Jesus' teachings about the Father cannot be squared with the Toscanos' belief that we do not have a direct relationship with our God and Father who is identical to Jesus' God and Father. This failure to come to grips with real history is endemic throughout the Toscanos' book.

To the extent the Toscanos assert that Mormon scripture teaches that Jesus is our God and Father and Jesus' Father is not, I think they are wrong. To the extent they assert that is what Mormon doctrine should be, regardless of what it actually is, I think they are misguided.

TWO observations on the Toscanos' method of arguing for one doctrine in preference to another are appropriate here. First, the Toscanos have some very good things to say about how we should approach and understand scripture. I liked their discussion of the fundamental issues of hermeneutics and interpretation. Second, the Toscanos simply ignore their own insights into scriptural interpretation when they actually get around to dealing with scriptures to support their

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views. Too often the Toscanos take one view asserted in scripture, cite a few scriptures which seem to support their view, and gloss over alternative points of view expressed in scripture. Their methodology can only be described as proof-texting—the wresting of scripture to support one's own point of view without regard for other possible interpretations or even other views presented in scripture itself. The Toscanos appear to torture the scriptures in favor of idiosyncratic interpretations. For example, they do not adopt the Book of Mormon teaching that the Son is identical to the Father, for they clearly recognize that Jesus as Father is separate from his Father in Heaven in identity. Rather, they adopt a strange hybrid not asserted by any scripture but which somehow becomes controlling for them: The notion that there is a God, the father of Jesus, but he is only Jesus' God and not ours. This doctrine is not only not scriptural, it doesn't make any sense.

The Toscanos go on to argue that the doctrine that Jesus shared our premortal state with us can be reconciled with their view because in this premortal state "He was a deity who had been resurrected, perhaps many times" (65). To support this view they note that when the premortal Christ appeared to the brother of Jared he did not say he appeared in his "spirit body"; rather, he stated that the brother of Jared saw "the body of my spirit" (Ether 3:16). The Toscanos see a significant difference in meaning between "spirit body" and "body of my spirit." This interpretation is tendentious at best and certainly does not support their view of numerous premortal resurrections. This scripture indicates, and quite clearly in my view, that Jesus is contrasting the body of flesh which he would someday (but had not yet) take upon himself with the body of spirit which he possessed prior to the incarnation: "Thou hast seen that I shall take upon me flesh and blood...even as I appear unto thee to be in the spirit will I appear unto my people in the flesh" (Ether 3:9,16). The future tense used for the mortal body which Jesus would one day take upon himself, the present tense used for the spirit, and the contrast between the body of flesh and the body of spirit indicate that Jesus was not flesh but spirit prior to his mortality. (Strangely the Toscanos continually refer to "incarnation" or enfleshment even though they believe that Jesus was already in the flesh prior to mortality and had to "disembody" himself to enter another body [65].) Further, I see absolutely no scriptural support for the Toscanos' view that Christ had been resurrected prior to mortal-

ity. This view raises an obvious question: How can a resurrected body die and again be resurrected, especially given the Toscanos' own argument that the resurrected body is perfected and a body of glory not subject to infirmities?

The Toscanos finally admit that "speculation and mythmaking" are the "only" way to deal "in a non-dogmatic way" with "God-concepts of Mormonism" (68). I agree that their arguments amount to "speculation and mythmaking," but not in any acceptable sense that they want to give to these words. Rather, their arguments seem to ignore the obvious meaning of Mormon scriptures for the mere purpose of disagreeing with the Mormon beliefs in general and with the evil "ecclesiastical institution" in particular.

The Toscanos also assert that Mormons are wrong to accept B. H. Roberts' view of premortal intelligences as individual centers of free will having cognitive and conative powers. They reject this view because they don't agree that persons "exist independently from God and...are innately good"; they argue that "until we were made independent, our self-existence or intelligence was merged in God's self-existence" (108). That is, until God created us, we existed merely as a "potentiality but not an actuality" in God. They seem to recognize that some statements by Joseph Smith are inconsistent with their view such as Joseph Smith's statement in the King Follett discourse: "The mind, the soul of man, the eternal part of man was never created." They argue that mere potentialities can be understood to have free will from all eternity: "Because we always existed in God as an independent potential we always had an independent will; therefore, God did not create our freedom from nothing." (109).

There are so many things wrong with this statement that it would be difficult to deal with them all in a book-length work. However, I should point out that mere potentialities simply don't have a free will because there is no will, no entity yet there. There is a subtle logical fallacy involved in such ephemeral things as "potential entities": It is certainly not appropriate to say that there now exists a free will possessed by a person who does not now actually exist. At best, one can coherently assert that "a person potentially exists who, if such person actually existed, would have free will." But to potentially be something is not to already be that thing. I am potentially the president of the United States, but that is hardly a potentiality that makes any difference to the way things actually are or will be. The Toscanos' views on this point might sound

nice in their phraseology, but when it is analyzed I think it's clear that they don't say anything that really makes any sense if it has any ascertainable meaning at all.

Again the Toscanos assert a view that is not anywhere expressed in Mormon scripture. Van Hale and I have written articles which analyze the Mormon concepts of human premortal existence which I believe more accurately represent Mormon beliefs than the Toscanos have done (see *Line Upon Line: Essays on Mormon Doctrine* [Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989], 115-144). I suspect that the Toscanos assert this view because they find it more amenable to their doctrines of human nature and grace than the classical Mormon view expressed by Joseph Smith and B. H. Roberts; rejection of the traditional Mormon view that humans exist eternally as individuals plays a major role in their arguments for their theory of grace (123).

GRACE AND FREE WILL

THE Toscanos also argue that Mormon doctrine is, properly understood, based on a rejection of works in relation to salvation and by "grace alone" (116-29). They argue that "Mormon scripture teaches salvation by grace, while the ecclesiastical institution throws its weight behind self-reliance, self-help, self-atonement, and self-salvation" (119), and unequivocally assert that in "Mormonism salvation is by grace alone" (129). Throughout the entire history of Christian thought the assertion that salvation is by grace alone has been understood to mean that human agency plays no role in salvation. Only God's decisions determine whether a person is saved or damned, rejected or exalted. That is why it is "grace alone" and not "grace and free will" or "grace and human decisions." Given this view, it follows that God chooses to leave at least some persons to damnation which he could save for some mysterious (translate it "arbitrary") reason (see my "The Concept of Grace in Christian Thought" in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, Winter 1991). The Toscanos apparently write ignoring the entire history of theological discussion on this point and in defiance of their own words, for their real position is not "grace alone" but "grace together with free human decisions": At one point they argue that God "made us free so that we could voluntarily accept God's gift of salvation by grace" (124). This position seems to amount to no more than the assertion that we are free to accept or reject God's saving grace—the ultimate

decision is up to us, not up to God. This is hardly a doctrine of "salvation by grace alone." The Toscanos' repeated failure to recognize the well-established meaning of the terms they use within the context of the entire history of Christian thought is a major weakness of their work. They use terms loaded with centuries of theological baggage as if they could simply ignore that meaning.

Notwithstanding the fact that the Toscanos teach that salvation is ultimately by free human decision in response to God's freely offered grace, they also embrace theological determinism and arbitrary divine decision. Responding to an argument that salvation by grace alone contradicts the Mormon concept of free will because it leads to determinism, the Toscanos state: "This argument is unpersuasive because determinism is not tied exclusively to the idea of grace. It fits into the idea of works too" (124). Note that they do not reject determinism; rather, they argue that determinism is unavoidable even if one believes in works, so it must be acceptable to believe in determinism as a result of grace as well. Their argument is certainly unpersuasive to me. It does not demonstrate that determinism necessarily follows from the commitment to good works; it only show

that determinism follows if one is confused about what "good works" mean. But such an argument hardly applies to a correct conception of the relation between works and grace. Further, the Toscanos have simply failed to respond to the argument that their view of grace contradicts free will because it adopts determinism. They appear to argue that two wrongs make a right. As I see it, they have simply denied the Mormon doctrine of free will, for determinism, in any form, is incompatible with the robust notion of libertarian free will adopted in Mormon scripture. (see my "The Concept of Grace in Mormon Thought" in *Dialogue*, Spring 1991). Strangely enough, the Toscanos reject the idea that God has absolute knowledge of the future because such a view contradicts the Mormon view of free will (101). I think that the Mormon notion of free will is in fact incompatible with infallible foreknowledge of the future. However, the same notion of free will is also incompatible with the determinism which the Toscanos use to protect their belief in grace alone.

The Toscanos also adopt the Lutheran notion (virtually absent in scripture) that persons, if saved by grace, are not judged by their own deeds but by Christ's merits (124-

25). This position is exactly the opposite of Alma's response to Corianton's argument that God is not just in his judgments. Alma argued that God is just precisely because all persons will be judged according to their own works. If they are good they shall have good rewarded to them in judgment, and if evil then they will reap evil (Alma 41). The view actually taught in Mormon scripture, it seems to me, is that persons must depend wholly on the merits of Christ to *enter* the way that leads to eternal life; but once on the path it is up to human will and perseverance to remain on the path.

The Toscanos' arguments for the doctrine of "salvation by grace alone" suffer from inadequate supporting evidence and a failure to see the implications of such beliefs. They cite a number of rather short and controversial articles, (one unpublished and the rest published in *SUNSTONE*, where one cannot expect to find exhaustive argumentation in four to eight pages) and assert that these articles "establish" that Mormonism teaches doctrines of original sin and salvation by grace alone (120). As we have seen, the Toscanos both do and don't mean "by grace alone without free human choice." Further, they fail to explain how persons could freely



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choose to accept God's grace if they are burdened by original sin, for given their doctrine persons must first freely accept God's grace in order to overcome original sin. Yet persons must be freed from original sin before they can freely choose to accept grace. This pair of doctrines thus establishes a vicious circle of presuppositions, which was the primary focus of Augustine and the entire Reformation debate. The only way to get an evil nature to accept grace, according to Augustine, is to make prevenient grace irresistible. But the Toscanos reject the notion of irresistible grace and do not seem to recognize that it is even a problem raised by the doctrine of "salvation by grace alone."

I think that it is accurate to say that the Toscanos have tried to claim as Mormon doctrine a view that is nowhere taught in any Mormon scripture, never asserted by a Church leader and positively contrary to the entire history of Mormon thought. And yet I agree with them that much more emphasis should be put on the teaching of grace in Mormon thought and discourse, and I applaud them for properly bringing the doctrine of grace to the forefront of discussion, even though I believe their own view of the matter is fundamentally flawed.

THE Toscanos certainly have a flare for catchy phrases. I found their book interesting from the standpoint of rhetoric alone. Consider for instance this felicitous phrase: "A pocket of time may become an eternity, which may eventually spawn new pockets of time that themselves may be transformed into eternities" (104). I like the way this phrase sounds, but I must confess I read it many times in context and couldn't for the life of me figure out what it might mean. I finally concluded that it wasn't intended to mean anything definite; just to sound good. The Toscanos' book abounds in such catchy but meaningless phrases. For example, I had somewhat the same response to the following quote:

[I]f the cosmos is truly the mind of God and if we are even now part of the divine, cosmic tabernacle, then evil in the universe done by devils and humans is an unavoidable part of God. The evil happening on earth is not only our responsibility but God's... God is good not because God is utterly disassociated from evil but because, as a being of glory, God can recognize evil, circumscribe it, and primarily through personal sacrifice God can bring good out of evil, light out of darkness, fullness out of empti-

ness, health out of sickness, and perfection out of imperfection. (112-13)

Can this be anything but outright and intentional contradiction? It is a theodicy which consists in calling evil good. The Toscanos' response to the problem of evil is that God is good because he ("he" is appropriate here because they refer solely to Christ as God in this passage) accepts responsibility for being evil. This just won't do. For example, the fact that the confessed murderer Gary Bishop accepted responsibility for brutally killing several young boys hardly exonerates him. Similarly, God cannot be regarded as good if he contains within himself evil and is in fact responsible for all events because he causes them via universal causal determinism as the Toscanos suggest. We cannot call such a being good in any sense consistent with the unconditioned awe, respect and worship which God demands and merits. I understand what it means to bring good out of evil, but the Toscanos fail to address the real problem of evil: Why is there anything evil in the first place if God is powerful enough to act unilaterally to make it good, as the Toscanos assert? Nevertheless, there is a strange consistency here, for their acknowledgment that God contains evil within himself is indeed entailed by the pantheistic view of God which they seem to adopt at this point.

THIS review has been critical so far, but I think there are also worthwhile and insightful observations made by the Toscanos. They are in the forefront of the movement to get women the priesthood. I found their responses to various arguments that women should not be given the priesthood to be convincing. The chapters treating the history of the priesthood concepts and women were both informed and interesting. (And they do consider real history and not mere myth in chapters 15, 16, and 18.) Even here I have some reservations, for I am very suspicious of anyone who argues a polemical position from historical evidence, especially one as inherently political as the Toscanos'. While I don't have the space here to cite examples, I think the Toscanos have slighted or ignored historical evidence to bend it into conformity with their view. However, I think that they have made an attempt to correct for their biases even if they are not wholly successful (nobody ever is).

Notwithstanding their interesting response to arguments against giving women the priesthood, they need something more. They need not only a response to such negative arguments, but also an affirmative argu-

ment that the Church has an obligation to give women the priesthood. They in fact give one such argument which I shall refer to as the "argument from democratic equality." The Toscanos observe: "Women are the spiritual equals of men and ought to have full access to all of the privileges, keys, rights, offices, callings, and gifts that have been available to men in the church" (7). I believe that this is the most common argument given by those who believe that women should have the priesthood: women are spiritual equals of men, therefore they ought to be called to the priesthood. However, this argument is invalid in an interesting way. Perhaps I can show the nature of this fallacy by a parallel argument from democratic equality.

Suppose that it is true (it may well be) that Rex Lee is the spiritual equal of Dallin Oaks (or any other person in the entire Church). Does it follow that God or the Church has any sort of obligation to make Rex Lee an apostle because of this spiritual equality? Of course not. The problem is that priesthood is not a democracy, not a result of spiritual equality, superiority, or inferiority. Priesthood is part of the inscrutable call from God to serve. It may go only to one tribe of a rather small nation, only to males, only to females, to all believers or to all humanity. Priesthood is not acquired through a political campaign like a democratic election. Perhaps some day women will be called to the priesthood or perhaps they already hold it in some non-trivial sense. Perhaps not. But it seems to me that God has no obligation to call any particular persons or even any group of persons to his priesthood because priesthood is not a right but an obligation, not a popularity contest but a calling, not a seal of righteousness but the opportunity to seal in heaven spiritual blessings for those who are righteous. The priesthood must be independent, to some degree, of the worthiness of its bearer. Otherwise the baptism performed by the unworthy priest is not valid. Orderly administration requires priesthood to be regarded as a universal characterizing God's righteousness rather than simply the worthiness or unworthiness of the particular person officiating in his office and calling. It is a calling that only God can choose. On the other hand, it seems to me that there isn't a good reason why God shouldn't choose women. The Toscanos have convinced me of that. But they haven't convinced me that God or the Mormon Church have some sort of moral obligation to grant women the priesthood.

The Toscanos also assert the basic "historical argument" that women have actually

held the priesthood in times past (chs. 15, 16 and 18). They clearly intend their readers to infer that if women held the priesthood in the past, then women should hold the priesthood now. I have always found this argument interesting because those who think women should be granted the priesthood also invariably argue that past tradition and practices are not necessarily a guide for what the present is or ought to be. In fact, the Toscanos make this very argument: "The fact that a condition prevails or is long-standing is no guarantee that it is God-approved" (212-213). The historical argument and the argument that tradition is not controlling are quite obviously inconsistent. For example, if it could be shown that women in fact did not hold any priesthood offices in the LDS church in the past (and I think a convincing argument for this proposition can be made from the historical evidence), would the Toscanos and other "Mormon feminists" accept the argument as valid to show that women should not hold priesthood offices now? Of course not. Neither should they accept it as a sound argument. My point is that all of this arguing about whether women held the priesthood in the past is quite irrelevant to whether women ought to hold priesthood offices today.

Clearly the heart of the Toscanos' innovations is belief in a "Jungian cosmology" wherein all persons pass through a maternal stage and later to a patriarchal stage and finally into an integrated stage where both maternal and paternal are joined in their personal development. Jung originally argued that individual persons develop from a stage of maternal orientation to paternal orientation. Jung noticed that many myths seem to deal with this process of individual development by transforming it into a story of hero development and struggle with maternal and paternal conflicts. The Toscanos wrench this concept from its basis in individual psychology and apply it to "cosmic history" and attempt to create a "new" Mormon myth out of it. Thus, all persons were originally in the presence of a Mother in Heaven who ruled in the preexistence and it is only with separation from our true selves and entrance into a fractured and fallen mortality that we enter into a patriarchal stage of existence. In the afterlife, we will return to a unity of male and female. The problem with this way of dealing with Jung is that it misapplies his original insights. There are few psychologists who would apply Jung's view at all, let alone take it seriously as an accurate picture of actual cosmic experience. The particular problem is

that when Jung's insights are taken from the arena of individual development and applied to cosmic history or myth, one commits the fallacy of composition—or the fallacy that the properties of one thing can be applied to the whole. It is analogous to the mistake of saying that a large crowd of people is a crowd of large people—and that certainly is a mistake. Their methodology would be seen as fallacious even by serious Jungian psychologists and, independent of its moorings in Jungian thought, there are no other reasons for believing that it describes anything remotely resembling reality.

The Toscanos also attempt to develop some concept of a Mother in Heaven. The notion of a Mother in Heaven seems to have a strong emotional appeal to many, especially feminists, many of whom find the Father figure to be unacceptable or too remote. The interplay of Freudian psychology in such views is very interesting. The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard argued that orthodox Christianity made God over in the image of the Roman emperor and pictured God as the reflection of the Roman empire itself. As such, God became the keeper of the status quo. The Toscanos recognize this profound psychology of religion and their entire book is an attempt to overturn the dominant images of the "male-dominated" (as they see it) LDS church which has created God (they claim) over in its own image as a priesthood quorum presidency of three males. They thus offer an alternative which incorporates maternal values into our "God-concept"—an attempt I applaud so long as the Mother in Heaven is a companion to rather than a replacement for our Father in Heaven. To their credit, they try to balance the male and the female rather than to replace an "inadequate" male. The view that I have heard from many "feminists," that our Father in Heaven is somehow unable to understand women because of his "maleness," is theologically naive and religiously grotesque, for God is the person whose immanent presence is aware of our own experiences as his very experiences. God is aware of everything from every perspective. It follows that God knows us better than we know ourselves. Any suggestion that God the Father is somehow less than aware or understanding is a failure to understand the nature of God. Yet one must pause to wonder why the Mother in Heaven has not revealed herself. We have poems and songs about the Mother in Heaven in the Mormon tradition, but not a single scripture that expressly addresses even the existence of a Mother in Heaven, let alone a revelation of her will and attributes. I raise the question

without any proposal for a definitive response.

I ALSO enjoyed the chapter called "Zion: Vision or Mirage." The Toscanos lament the loss of the vision of Zion which was the heart, soul, and very life-blood of early Mormonism. Their comments on Zion and its loss are eloquent and insightful, though also very depressing. I urge the reader to peruse this chapter.

I do not share the Toscanos' extreme alienation or disillusionment with the "institutional hierarchy" because I have had enough direct contact to know that the "institution" is simply made up of real people doing their best to promote the kingdom of God. They are far from perfect—but to expect them to be somehow more divine than the rest of us is the great lie. I lament that the Church leaders are largely business people who do not have competence in philosophical theology—but on second thought maybe the Church is better off without professional theologians. Like the Toscanos, I feel some alienation, but that is the essence of human experience. The Toscanos are extremely critical of Church leaders. I hope they don't mind that I have been critical of them. One paragraph in their book is especially enlightening to explain the Toscanos' perspective and motives and is a good summary of their entire work. I call this passage the Toscanos' confession:

Many of us [read "we the Toscanos"] who have felt the call to Zion in our blood and in our bones wrongly thought we had been called to be "a marvelous work and wonder," to realize the fulfillment of all the promises. But this was too great an expectation. God has made too many promises. We should have known we could not see with the eyes nor speak with the tongues of angels. We unwisely let our expectations inflate; and then, perhaps, we lost our faith and became cynical when faced with the meagerness of our contributions and the puniness of our results. (232-33)

Strangers in Paradox seems to me to suffer similarly from inflated expectations and claims. I think that a good argument can be made that the Toscanos have not sufficiently distinguished between paradox, mere difference, and outright contradiction. They mistake theology for sheer speculation and literary and political bravado. I believe that Mormon theology deserves more thought and less fanfare. ☐