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John G. Turner. *The Mormon Jesus: A Biography.* Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2016. 368 pp. $29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-73743-3.

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The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church) has long wrestled with their identity among traditional Christianities reluctant to consider Mormonism authentically Christian. The LDS movement began after a young, charismatic New Englander experienced a series of theophanies, brought forth divine revelation, and published the Book of Mormon, a new scripture that self-identifies as "another testament of Jesus Christ." Despite the overwhelming Christ-centeredness of Mormonism, traditional Christianity continues to reject the Mormon Jesus as being too heterodox for inclusion in Christendom. Who is this Mormon Jesus that is simultaneously familiar and foreign to Christianity? Furthermore, is this a Christ who should be recognized within the religion? In *The Mormon Jesus: A Biography*, John T. Turner, ssociate professor of religious studies at George Mason University, sets out to answer these two questions. He describes Jesus Christ through the historical lens of the Mormon experience, for example, scripture, revelation, artwork, culture, temple ritual, and hymns. The result is a biography of the Mormon Jesus and his followers, who have long identified as a "peculiar people" in both the biblical sense of being in covenant with their God (Deuteronomy 14:2, KJV) and the societal sense of being on the fringes of mainstream religious and social life.

One of Turner's goals throughout his book is the normalizing of Mormonism by demonstrating that Latter-day Saints and their Jesus are not so peculiar after all. He addresses the myriad concerns that traditional Christianity has with Mormonism. While modern Christians may be put off by Mormonism's theophanies, new scripture, and prophetic revelation and visions, Turner argues that they have little room for concern. After all, theophanies—or, better, ***christophanies***—were a common element of nineteenth-century Christianity in the American frontier. Many people claimed that Christ appeared to them for various reasons. Joseph's religious experience is not much different from that of his visionary, restorationist contemporaries. Also, the Christian movement itself was catapulted through the remarkable conversion experience of the Apostle Paul after his famous christophany on the road to Damascus. The oddness of the Book of Mormon's translation by seer stone melts away when one considers that scrying was commonplace in nineteenth-century North America. It is true that Joseph embarked on an ambitious project of retranslating the Bible by editing portions without knowledge of biblical languages. However, according to Turner, both Alexander Campbell and Thomas Jefferson similarly took up the task of altering the Bible to suit their purposes. What about the strange Mormon

belief, derived from the Book of Mormon, that Native Americans descended from the lost tribes of Israel? Many of Joseph's contemporaries speculated similar ideas.

Perhaps the greatest peculiarity of Mormonism is their Christology. Critics and skeptics of Mormonism have chronicled the evolution of the Mormon Christology as evidence of theological heterodoxy or even religious fraud. They have argued that Mormonism began with a Jesus similar to the Protestant Messiah, but have since reformulated him into Jehovah. He is now a distinct personage who, having married and fathered children, achieved exaltation and exists as the second person of the tritheistic Godhead. Turner, however, points out that Christians themselves have benefited from an evolved Christology. The first four centuries of Christianity underwent a series of theological formulations and revisions as one council after another articulated its belief about the Son of God, only to be declared insufficient or, worse, anathema by the next council.

In truth, considering its history, mainstream Christianity only holds a mere handful of reasons to consider Mormonism peculiar. Mormon temples, for example, draw a stark line between traditional Christianity and Mormonism, where the former views Christ as the fulfillment of an obsolete Old Testament system and the latter views temples as a key feature of latter-day Christianity. Turner discusses three features within temple worship that highlight these differences. First, like other historians before him, Turner notices the obvious parallels between Mormon temple ordinances and the rituals of Freemasonry. He argues that Joseph Smith simply appropriated elements of Freemasonry and "Mormonized" them to suit his purposes (p. 195). Second, Turner notes the difference between traditional Christian marriage and Mormon sealing. Where Christian marriage is terminated at death—thus, "till death do us part"—Mormon marriages, when sealed within the temple, last for eternity. Third, while Christianity has historically seen the work of atonement primarily a responsibility of Christ, Mormonism invites Latter-day Saints to cooperate with him via the temple ordinance of proxy baptism, or "baptism for the dead" as it is more colloquially known (p. 213). These three unique theological positions currently divide traditional Christianity from Mormonism.

The differences notwithstanding, Turner concludes that Mormonism is a genuine branch of Christianity. It is not, as others have suggested, a new religious movement or a new world religion. At the very least, non-LDS Christians have little room to complain of Mormonism's historical peculiarities and theological evolution because Christianity itself went through a similar process on its way to becoming one of the world's largest religions. Consequently, mainstream Christians should recognize Mormonism as a legitimate, albeit new and unique, expression of Christianity.

I found much of this book very enjoyable. Turner is a gifted storyteller and historian, so his writing truly feels like a biography. As a non-LDS outsider, he offers a unique perspective on the establishment, growth, and development of Christ in Mormon thought over the past two centuries. Despite being non-LDS, Turner is clearly no stranger to the topic of Mormonism. He previously authored the well-received and acclaimed 2012 biography ***Brigham Young: Pioneer Prophet***. The depth and fluidity of Turner's writing in both ***Brigham Young*** and ***Mormon Jesus*** would have the reader assume he is a practicing Latter-day Saint.

Equally clear is the fact that Turner is an excellent historian, which becomes evident in his creative ability to answer perplexing questions. For example, any student of Mormon history will notice how few references to the Book of Mormon appear in early LDS writing. Naturally, this seems strange given the massive influence of the "Golden Bible" in the early days of the movement. Turner convincingly suggests that high illiteracy

rates among the Saints, in combination with a torrent of new revelation from a living prophet, discouraged any in-depth study of the new scripture. In contrast, modern Mormonism is busy making up lost ground as many LDS scholars are currently engaged in plumbing the depths of a book that was somewhat foreign to their predecessors.

I especially appreciate the way Turner interlaces the book with anti-Mormon criticism. It is a helpful reminder that external pressures influenced the way in which Mormon thinkers engaged critics and formulated their own creeds. However, I would like to have seen more interaction with this criticism aside from the notable anti-Mormon writers Walter Martin and Ed Decker. It is nearly impossible to discuss modern critiques of Mormon thought without the inclusion of Fawn Brodie whose monumentally influential biography of Joseph Smith, ***No Man Knows My History*** (1945), has forever cemented her name into Mormon literary history. She only appears once in Turner's introductory remarks. Even then, Brodie's presence comes through a quote from Jan Shipps, a celebrated scholar of Mormonism. In a biography of Jesus, not Joseph, I suppose minimal inclusion of Brodie is to be expected; however, only one mention is insufficient.

By way of critique, Turner seems to side with the LDS Church's position that the Book of Mormon is more a "revelation" than a "translation" in the conventional sense of the term (p. 27). I find it unlikely that Joseph and his earliest followers would have understood the Book of Mormon as revelation over translation. It seems more likely that they believed it was a revelatory translation. Even the Book of Mormon is self-consciously aware of its need for translation from "reformed Egyptian" (Ether 5:1; Moroni 9:32), or, as Turner describes it, a language "that others cannot interpret without the use of two stones" (p. 21). For some reason he prefers to avoid using the term "reformed Egyptian." At any rate, claiming revelation over translation avoids the pesky issues of the non-extant plates and evidence for the Book of Mormon's original language, but it does a disservice to Book of Mormon historicism and the earliest followers whose conversion experiences were marked, at least in part, by the miraculous bringing forth of its translation. After all, according to LDS scripture, Joseph was called by the Lord to be a "prophet, seer, and ***translator***" (D&C 21:1; 107:92, 124:125, emphasis added). Jettisoning the term "translator" evacuates the oddness of how the Book of Mormon was brought forth, but inaccurately describes how Joseph understood his role as translator. To be sure, Joseph self-identified as a revelator, but not in lieu of his role as translator.

At times, I found myself distracted by the way Turner presents some aspects of religious history. When speaking on Christology, particularly in relation to the history of Christian thought, clarity is key. Sometimes it feels as if Turner opts for ambiguity over clarity to highlight his point rather than elucidating and clarifying what certain theologians have communicated in the past. For example, while surveying the history of Christian thought regarding christophanies in the Old Testament, Turner quotes the reformer John Calvin as stating, "the orthodox doctors of the Church have correctly and wisely expounded, that the Word of God was the supreme angel" (p. 204). This carefully selected quote may leave the uninformed reader with the impression that Calvin and the early church fathers ontologically associated Christ with an angelic being. However, this is far from the case. Calvin began the section quoted by Turner, "Jehovah is said to have appeared in the ***form*** of an Angel" (***Institutes*** 1:118, emphasis added). As a result, Turner's point feels a bit off knowing Calvin's sharp ontological distinction between creator and creation.

Elsewhere, Turner quotes a Book of Mormon prophecy of the Virgin Mary that describes her as the "mother of God" (p. 28). This quotation, "mother of God," is not actually found in the current

edition of the Book of Mormon, neither was it intended for publication when the first edition was printed in 1830. The printer's manuscript shows that Joseph revised the verse to read "mother ***of the Son*** of God" (emphasis added). By 1837, Joseph ensured that his revision of this passage from "mother of God" to "mother ***of the Son*** of God" made it to print, perhaps to bring this verse in line with his developing Christology or to clarify that the verse was speaking of the Son and not the Father (see Mosiah 15:2-3). Regrettably, Turner does not inform the reader of the revision, thus leaving the quote orphaned from any historical context. Even a small footnote to inform the reader of the revision would have been appreciated.

Still, ***Mormon Jesus*** is an excellent treatise on the Mormon Christology in its development and current form. It provides a breathtaking overview of Christ in Mormon thought from the pre-Book of Mormon era to the present. Regardless of whether one agrees with Turner's conclusion—that Mormonism is a non-peculiar, albeit new and unique, branch of Christianity—he provides the field of Mormon studies with a valuable resource that should prove useful for years to come.