

RETHINKING THEOLOGY: THE SHADOW OF THE APOCALYPSE

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According to the Gospels, one of the most frequently repeated of Jesus's messages during his earthly ministry was "The kingdom of God [or "heaven"] is at hand."¹ Indeed, early in his ministry Jesus describes preaching the kingdom of God, the reign of God, as his very message.² He does not announce that the kingdom *will* come near, but that it has already done so. As odd as it may sound to our ears, in the New Testament to preach the gospel is to preach the present nearness of the kingdom of God.

But the Lord does not announce the nearness of his kingdom only in the New Testament. He also announces it, indeed insists on it, in the Doctrine and Covenants, which opens with a call to all the world to hear his voice and a warning of destruction for those who do not

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1. See, for example, Mark 1:15 and Matthew 10:7. The verb translated "is nigh" means, literally, "has come near": ἐγγιζω: to draw near in space or time. Walter Bauer, Frederick William Danker, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Dictionary of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

2. Luke 4:43: "I must preach the kingdom of God to other cities also: for therefore am I sent."

(D&C 1:1, 4, 11–13). The second coming, the Apocalypse, begins with the restoration, and it is figured in the lives of all who hearken to its call: “the Lord is nigh” (D&C 1:12; see also verses 35–36). To hear the gospel preached is to experience the nearness, both temporally and spatially, of the kingdom. It is to have an experience figured by the Apocalypse, the revelation of God’s kingdom; the revelation of the kingdom of God to a person is figured by, is a type of, the revelation of his kingdom that will happen at the last day.³ Thus, the revelation of the reign of God is not only something far away in time, something to be awaited, but something here and now. It happens in our lives when we become part of the kingdom of God. When that happens, the reign of God—his rule over us—has begun, a fact we signify when we agree to take his name on us (Moroni 4:3). In such an experience the Apocalypse does not so much refer to the end of the world—though it also refers to that—as it refers to the moment when the nearness of the kingdom of God is revealed to the believer and the believer’s life is oriented by that kingdom rather than by the world. To hear the gospel preached is to experience a type or shadow of the Apocalypse, to “stand before the judgment seat of Christ” (Romans 14:10), not as a criminal, but as one freed. So the Apocalypse as the revelation of God’s kingdom is not something to be feared, but to be hoped for, longed for.

The Book of Mormon uses the terms *type* and *shadow* as equivalents (Mosiah 13:10). We sometimes speak of figures and mean the same thing. Types, shadows, and figures are the things in the world by means of which we see the things of God. The various meanings of *type* (including a small block with a raised, reversed letter on it for printing; a kind; an exemplar; and a symbol) result from the fact that they share the same etymological origin: a *τύπος* is the mark of a blow or a stamp, an imprint. If we see the world through religious eyes, we see the imprint of God’s work in everything. And some things particularly bear that imprint. When I see my relation to my children to be shaped by the relation I have to my Father in Heaven, I see my fatherly work as a type of the work of the Father, as if it were a shadow cast by his work,

3. I rely here on the fact that the Greek word ἀποκαλύπτω, the root of *apocalypse*, means “to uncover, to disclose, or to reveal.” Bauer et al., *A Greek-English Dictionary*.

as something figured or formed by him and what he does. So, when I understand what it means to be a father, I have a better understanding of who the Father is and what he does. I see him through the things in the world because those things are “stamped,” or figured, by him. I know of no Book of Mormon term for what shows itself in the type or shadow, but the technical term is *antitype*, though I prefer the less common noun *prefigure*.⁴ When Christ’s second coming, the prefigure, is fully revealed, the old world will end, the new reign of God will begin, and no one will be able to resist (Mosiah 27:31). The individual’s encounter with the risen Lord is a figure of that second coming, for in each event the old world ends and a new world begins. Like Christ himself, whose beauty is not apparent, so that people do not see his desirability (Isaiah 53:2), the prefigure of his second coming remains *invisible* to most because they cannot see its figures in the world. It remains invisible to all who have not encountered the Lord, whose experience of the world is *not* a figure, type, or shadow of his coming. Seeing and hearing the announcement of Christ’s coming and the nearness of his kingdom does not require that we acknowledge this, that, or another fact, but that we experience the world *as* God’s kingdom. Of course, to have that experience will result in facts that one acknowledges, but the experience is fundamental rather than the facts.

Having read to his people from Isaiah’s prophecy of Israel’s eventual redemption, Jacob says:

O then, my beloved brethren, come unto the Lord, the Holy One. . . . And whoso knocketh, to him will he open; and the wise, and the learned, and they that are rich, who are puffed up because of their learning, and their wisdom, and their riches—yea, they are they whom he despiseth; and save they shall cast these things away, and consider themselves fools before God, and come down in the depths of humility,

4. In Greek, ἀντίτυπος means “that which corresponds to something else.” Bauer et al., *A Greek-English Dictionary*. The type is the shape impressed in the soft wax. The antitype is that which has struck the wax, forming the impression. Compare 1 Peter 3:21: “which [referring to the salvation of Noah’s family in the ark] was a prefigure [ἀντίτυπος] of baptism.”

he will not open unto them. But the things of the wise and the prudent shall be hid from them forever—yea, that happiness which is prepared for the saints. (2 Nephi 9:41–43)

Those who trust what their riches, learning, or worldly wisdom allow them to see will not be able to see the happiness prepared for the Saints. The results of the gospel are hidden from, invisible to, the merely learned; without the figured, typological experience of conversion, we cannot see the truth of the gospel. Jacob’s insight has been, I believe, shared by other thinkers. It is, for example, a variation of Augustine’s admonition, “Believe that you may understand,”⁵ which became Anselm’s motto, “faith seeking understanding.”⁶ These thinkers agree that the understanding that the Christian seeks can only be achieved if he or she first has faith; without faith, understanding will be blind.

As I understand the implications of Jacob’s teaching for theology, they include that as long as theology remains merely a matter of learning, we can “see” neither the gospel nor its teaching. The doctrine that the Messiah has come into the world and died so that all might come to him—meaning that we repent, are baptized, receive the Holy Ghost, and endure to the end (3 Nephi 27:13–16)—remains invisible. (In scripture *the* doctrine is the preaching of the gospel described by Christ in 3 Nephi. The word *doctrines*, in the plural, is used exclusively to refer to false doctrines.)⁷ However, as long as the Good News and God’s kingdom are invisible in theology, it cannot really be talk about God. What we say may concern itself with his effects in this world or with our ideas and understanding of him. It may be about the details of our beliefs, our understanding of his revelation. Theology may be about many things, but it is not about *him* if it does not reveal him, and it does not reveal him if it does not announce the nearness of his

5. *Tractates on the Gospel of John* 29.6.

6. As Anselm explains in the preface to *Proslogion*, that motto was the original title of his *Monologion*.

7. Louis Midgley, review of *Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon: Volume I, First and Second Nephi; Volume II, Jacob through Mosiah*, by Joseph Fielding McConkie and Robert L. Millet, *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 1 (1989): 92–113, esp. 100. It seems that scripture generally understands doctrine to be the preaching of the gospel rather than a collection of beliefs.

kingdom. In light of what Jacob tells us, that theology must go beyond mere learning to allow the things of God to be opened or revealed to us. Our theology must be a figure of the Apocalypse, a theology that reveals God himself, even if only as a figure, rather than revealing only our current partial understanding of him.

Four years ago, I addressed the question of how Latter-day Saint theology is possible in another lecture, “Why a Mormon Won’t Drink Coffee but Might Have a Coke.”⁸ There I argued that the absence of official rational explanations or descriptions of beliefs and practices, and the presence of differing and inconsistent explanations for and descriptions of belief within the membership of the church, suggests that we have little if any official systematic, rational, or dogmatic theology.⁹ (I use those three terms, *systematic theology*, *rational theology*, and *dogmatic theology*, as synonyms.) We are “a-theological”—which means that we are without a church-sanctioned, church-approved, or even church-encouraged systematic theology—and that is as it should be because systematic theology is dangerous.¹⁰

I made my argument using three subarguments:

1. *Continuing revelation is primary to Mormonism.* Since Latter-day Saints insist on continuing revelation, they cannot have a dogmatic theology that is any more than provisional and heuristic, for a theology claiming to be more than that could always be trumped by new revelation. Dogmatic theology, however, tempts us to think we have found something more. As a rational system, it gives the appearance of being complete.

8. James Faulconer, “Why a Mormon Won’t Drink Coffee but Might Have a Coke: The Atheological Character of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints” (lecture, conference on God, Humanity, and Revelation: Perspectives from Mormon Philosophy and History, Yale University, 29 March 2003).

9. As used in theology, *dogmatic* means “pertaining to doctrines/teachings,” not “asserting . . . opinions, in an authoritative, imperious, or arrogant manner.” Cf. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “dogmatic.” Though dogmatic and systematic theology are not the same, the difference between them—namely, the sanction of a church for the first but not the second—is irrelevant here, so I ignore it, and I add *rational theology* as a synonym for the other two.

10. Though there are many varieties of theology, dogmatic (i.e., church-approved) theology is always systematic theology.

2. *Practice is more important than belief, particularly explicated belief.* By focusing on belief rather than on practice, dogmatic theology poses a danger to true religion (see James 2:19–20), threatening to invert the relative importance of thought or belief, on the one hand, and practice, on the other, as it eventually did in the early church.¹¹

3. *Scripture is more important than rational explanation.* In addition to continuing revelation, the locus of explanation for Latter-day Saint belief is scripture. However, unlike rational/dogmatic theology as it is usually construed, but like prophetic revelation, scripture is testimony that questions us, thereby calling us to new life in Christ rather than to a set of rationally ordered belief propositions to which we are asked to assent. In other words, dogmatic theology does not deal directly with the substance of religious faith, namely life *in* Christ rather than beliefs *about* Christ.

If my arguments are right, then systematic theology is dangerous, and it is not surprising that we find little official sanction for it in the church.

Of course, for Latter-day Saints, talk about God that reveals God—the best sense of the word *theology*—is, first of all, the revelations given through the prophets. We dare to say that God continues to reveal himself authoritatively to human beings through another human being. Unless one insists that all theology be systematically rational, and I know of no one who does, it makes sense to call prophetic revelation theology. Indeed, revelation is *the* Latter-day Saint theology. However, I believe that those Saints who have done theology in the nonrevelatory sense have, for the most part, done it systematically and rationally.¹² From the nineteenth and early twentieth century, Orson Pratt and John A. Widtsoe come to mind, both in works that few today would

11. I've recently learned of an unpublished paper by John L. Sorenson, "Ritual as Theology and as Communication," which makes a case that for Latter-day Saints ritual is our most common theology. The paper is "a substantially revised version" of "Ritual as Theology," *Sunstone*, May–June 1981, 11–14. Needless to say, I find Sorenson's paper persuasive.

12. I ignore the fact that I think church history has been, for many Latter-day Saints, the place where our theology has been expressed. I do so because few, if any, church historians or other Saints have seen history as *at the same time* theological.

find philosophically or scientifically acceptable.¹³ Some, such as BYU’s David Paulsen and the independent scholar Blake Ostler, do it today with interesting and well-respected results.

These kinds of thinkers see no difficulty in holding to two propositions, “Theology is the continuously revealed word of God” and “Theology is rational, dogmatic, or systematic theology.” I do not know what either Paulsen or Ostler believes regarding the second of these claims,¹⁴ though I assume that they accept the first as one meaning for the word *theology*. Regardless of their positions, however, based on more than thirty-five years of talking with other Latter-day Saints about theological questions, I believe that most of us who do theology or some informal version of it assume that God’s knowledge is a systematic whole and that he reveals parts of that whole over time, gradually revealing or restoring more and more of it. If so, then those who think that way assume that, using the part of the whole that has been revealed so far, they can tentatively speculate as to the systematic whole which stands behind the part. However, as reasonable as that may seem, I think it is mistaken.

For one thing, to claim that our speculations are concerned with an eternal, rational system of truths that God reveals to us over time assumes that knowledge is fundamentally and essentially systematic and rational. In other words, it assumes that all knowledge is either self-evident,¹⁵ incorrigible,¹⁶ or a result of direct sense-perception—or it can be rationally and systematically derived from those three kinds of knowledge. However, much of twentieth-century philosophy, with work ranging from that of Martin Heidegger, to American pragmatism, to Alvin Plantinga and others in the analytic tradition of philosophy, has made that assumption about the character of knowledge dubious, each in different ways. It is questionable whether it makes sense to

13. Some of Pratt’s work is particularly flawed, but to my mind both Widtsoe and Pratt accept Newtonian science as if it were unquestionable, making each untenable.

14. Either of them, for example, could believe that systematic theology is merely one of several kinds of theology rather than either the fundamental or the only kind.

15. For example, axioms.

16. For example, my genuinely held beliefs about what I am currently, explicitly thinking.

believe that there is an eternally existing set of systematically related fundamental truths expressed at least in part in our accurate understanding of things. Indeed, I believe that most who have dealt with the question carefully have concluded that the notion is rationally incoherent. However, it does not follow from that rejection of an eternal realm of truth that is metaphysically prior to or beyond this world that there is no truth, nor that there is no eternal truth. We can reject the Enlightenment formulation of truth without rejecting truth itself.

Some forms of systematic theology that we find among Latter-day Saints are philosophically problematic and, whether a particular kind of systematic theology is entangled in those problems or not, it is dangerous. However, the possible problems of systematic theology mean neither that systematic theology per se is impossible nor that those who do it sin. We need apocalyptic theology, to be sure—at least as continuing revelation—but apocalyptic theology is not a *kind* like “dogmatic theology” or “liturgical theology.” A *kind* is a group of related objects, and apocalyptic theology is not in the same group as dogmatic, liturgical, or other ways of doing theology. The latter kinds of theology are defined by their objects and methods. They differ by having differing objects and methods, but they are alike in that they are defined by those objects and methods. In contrast, apocalyptic theology is of a different kind, for it is defined by what it does rather than by its objects and methods; it is defined by its revelation of the nearness of the kingdom of God.

So I would supplement my previous argument: though rational, dogmatic theology may be dangerous, it too can be apocalyptic. Indeed, systematic theology has an important place in apologetics as well as in critical theology, for it explains our beliefs to others and helps us understand the limits of our claims about God. I doubt that we could argue that Orson Pratt’s theology was defective, as I would, without doing systematic theology. It may be, as I believe, that other kinds of theology are less likely to fail to be apocalyptic, but no theology is, in itself, incompatible with apocalyptic theology, and no theology can, in itself, avoid the dangers of theology.

How, then, does a theology avoid the heresy¹⁷ of being nonapocalyptic, of making the gospel something I choose rather than something God gives? Theologizing by those who are not prophets may put the kingdom at a distance by making talk about the gospel merely talk about our own learning, but how does theologizing by nonprophets avoid doing that and, at the same time, take seriously the proximity of the kingdom, inviting us to enter it?¹⁸

With Jacob as our guide, as a first step toward understanding what apocalyptic theology is, we could say that it opens a moment of understanding and conversion, a moment on the way toward membership in the kingdom of God. Thus, we could recast the discussion in these terms: Philosophy thinks being-in-the-world.¹⁹ Theology thinks being-in-the-world directed toward God. If we recast the discussion further, using the terms of apocalyptic theology we can say that philosophy thinks being-in-the-world while apocalyptic theology thinks being-in-the-world as a figure of the Apocalypse. The danger is that the addendum *directed toward God* will cease to be the compass of our thinking. When it does, our being-in-the-world is no longer a type and shadow of the Apocalypse. The nearness of God's reign no longer defines as a whole the movement of our life with others and among things.

Of course, theology occurs *in* the world. However we theologize, whether with dogmatic theology or some other kind (hermeneutic, feminist, liberation, liturgical, . . .), the challenge is to do it without succumbing to the unavoidable risk that our theology will turn in on

17. I depend here on the meaning of the Greek root, αἰρετικός, “to grasp,” “to take for oneself,” “to choose.” Bauer et al., *A Greek-English Dictionary*.

18. I am, of course, using the word *prophet* here in its narrow sense, namely to refer to those called and set apart as prophets. In its wider sense, “someone who genuinely speaks the word of God,” the term *prophetic theology* would mean the same as *apocalyptic theology*.

19. This phrase comes from the work of the twentieth-century German philosopher Martin Heidegger. He argued that our fundamental encounter with the world is not one of a consciousness faced with something outside of or opposed to it. Rather, we are beings who find ourselves already *in* a world of things and others, with projects to accomplish. Reason, abstraction, explicit consciousness—these arise as part of and in response to our initial situation in the world. “Being-in-the-world” describes that initial situation.

itself, becoming a merely academic, only mental, exercise that claims to refer to God but in which he does not make himself known nor call us to his kingdom, because it is an exercise referring to our own ideas. However, the alternative to that mistake is not a thinking that is outside of or beyond the world in some way, the thought of that which is absolutely other than this world—and given the Latter-day Saint belief in God’s immanence in existence, his indwelling in existence, we ought not even to desire such supposed purity of thought. The challenge is not to think another world or to think other than the world. It is not to create a Platonic metaphysics. The challenge is to think our being-in-the-world differently, to think it directed toward God by his self-revelation in the world. In other words, apocalyptic theology aims to remake the world of its hearers and readers by allowing the kingdom to be revealed.²⁰ An apocalyptic theology is one in which the theologian can see the “happiness which is prepared for the saints” in this world (2 Nephi 9:43).

The contemporary French philosopher-theologian Jean-Luc Marion makes a distinction that we can use to think further about the difference between apocalyptic and nonapocalyptic theology because it mirrors the distinctions of scripture. Marion writes of the “idol” and the “icon.”²¹ Begin with the icon: an icon reveals something other than itself, something divine. Apocalyptic theology as I am describing it is iconic. It reveals the nearness of the kingdom. In contrast, with an idol I claim to produce something that re-presents, that *makes* manifest, the Divine. The idol creates the appearing of the god rather than merely creating a locus in which that appearing may happen. In creating an idol I have the audacity to claim to make the Divine appear, even if only in an image. If “theology” means only “our talk about God,” then it is idolatrous, for in it I use my powers of language to create an image of God, violating the second of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:4–5; Deuteronomy 5:8–9). I walk in my own way and after the image of

20. “Allowing” is essential. We cannot force or guarantee that the revelation will occur. We can only strive to make it possible.

21. See, in particular, Jean-Luc Marion, *The Idol and Distance: Five Studies* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001).

my own god, “whose image is in the likeness of the world, and whose substance is that of an idol” (D&C 1:16). I reveal myself—*my* ideas, *my* world, *my* perspective on God—in what I say; I do “autology” rather than theology. By contrast, in an icon the Divine reveals itself (cf. D&C 1:17). As Christian theologians know (and not only Latter-day Saint Christian theologians), without revelation, theology is idolatry. In my terms, unless a theology is apocalyptic, it is idolatrous.

Marion’s terminology helps us see more clearly something about theology that we have already glimpsed—namely, that the difference between the two ways of doing theology is *not* methodological. The difference between them is *how* they exist in our world, not what properties they have. Just as is true for any religious object, any theology can be idolatrous, and any theology can be iconic. There is probably no theology that is, in itself, apocalyptic; there is probably no theology that is unavoidably blind to “the things of the wise and the prudent.” However, if the essential difference between idolatrous and apocalyptic theology is neither their objects nor their methods, then how can we describe the latter? If the difference between the two is primarily their existential *how*, what can we say of that *how*? What happens in a theology in which God reveals himself, an apocalyptic theology, that does not happen in one in which we merely examine our ideas of God, a theology *simpliciter* or idolatrous theology?

In apocalyptic theology, whatever we do, what is most important is not what we do or what we say, but what happens to us and our audiences. The passivity of experience is more important than the activity of reason and will (which does not make reason, will, or content unimportant). What happens, what we experience, is the coming of the kingdom. We find ourselves in the kingdom of God—at least at its edge—rather than in the dark and dreary world. The practice of psychiatry, whatever one thinks of the merits of that practice, provides a good analogy to apocalyptic theology.²² The traditional psychiatric therapist encourages the patient to talk, asking questions to encourage more talk and to give direction to the patient’s talk. Whatever cure

22. I am indebted to an online discussion with Joe Spencer and others, particularly Adam Miller, for this analogy.

finally comes is the result of the patient talking in response to the psychiatrist's questions. Trying to deal with the therapist's questions and aporias (puzzling difficulties) and trying to say something coherent in response, the patient comes to see the world newly. It is not that the questions led directly to the patient's insight. It is not that the content of the patient's responses was the cure. Rather, trying to formulate coherent responses to the questions and aporias brought the patient to the point of seeing things differently. A new world was revealed to the patient as he or she went through the therapy of being questioned.

We can think of doing apocalyptic theology as something like that. An apocalyptic theology confronts us with questions and aporias, whether it does so explicitly or not. The questions may arise in us without being explicitly proposed by the theologian. They may come from the philosophical tradition as things for us to ponder. They may happen as we read scripture and find ourselves accused as did David, "Thou art the man" (2 Samuel 12:7). Of course the questions have content, as do our responses. Without a particular content, the questions are meaningless. But the questions and responses are not the point. The point is what happens to us in dealing with those aporias: trying to respond to them coherently, we find ourselves reinterpreted, resituated in the world. We find ourselves in a world revealed by the Spirit and directed toward a God who makes himself known. In the aporias I experience the second coming, the nearness of the kingdom. I hear a call that obliges me to respond, and I respond with acceptance.

I recognize that many will find this way of thinking about theology difficult. I suspect that the difficulty is rooted in our tendency to think of religion as a set of beliefs, a tendency inherited from the Christian tradition. On this view, religion is a set of beliefs, and theology organizes and examines that set of beliefs in some way. Those who understand theology in that way do not understand talk of apocalyptic theology because they cannot see more than one basic kind of theology, and in that kind they see religion is defined by belief. Of course, religion as we understand it entails beliefs. It is problematic to say, "I am a Mormon, but I do not believe what Mormons believe." Beliefs certainly matter. Nevertheless, believing what Mormons believe is not

enough to make one a Latter-day Saint, so examining beliefs is not enough to understand Mormonism. We can imagine someone who believes everything that most Saints believe but is, in spite of that, not a member of the church. Why? Because that person has not yet been baptized. Even in religions that do not, as do Latter-day Saints, insist on the necessity of ordinances, religion cannot be reduced merely to belief.²³ Especially in a faith for which priesthood is essential and ordinances are required, beliefs are not sufficient to define religion.

The Lord commands ancient Israel, “Ye shall be holy [“set apart,” “consecrated”]: for I the Lord your God am holy” (Leviticus 19:2). Similarly, during his ministry in Israel, he commands, “Be ye therefore perfect [or “whole”], even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:48),²⁴ and he repeats that command when he comes to the Nephites (3 Nephi 12:48). To be in Israel, ancient or modern, is not only to hold a set of beliefs, but to make and keep covenants with God. It is to enter into a formal relation with him in which we imitate him. For Latter-day Saints, covenant rather than belief is the heart of religion. It is probably true that no covenants fail to entail beliefs, but the important point is that religious beliefs do not matter if they are not intimately bound up with covenants. Apocalyptic theology evinces that intimate connection to covenant. It is not enough to say what we think about God. It is not enough even to say what we know. If a theology is apocalyptic, it must go beyond learning to the gospel, to the *revelation* of Christ. It must be not only about beliefs; it must also be testimony. For Latter-day Saints, apocalyptic theology must go beyond learning and even testimony to being part of covenant life, for we cannot reveal God by representing him in an idol of some sort, but he reveals himself in our covenant life.

That we cannot reveal God, make an image of him, takes us back to a point in Jacob’s sermon: theology is not only a matter of going beyond learning through testimony and covenant, though it is that. It

23. See my “Scripture as Incarnation,” in *Historicity and the Latter-day Saint Scriptures*, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2001), 17–61; esp. 54 n. 22.

24. Given the parallel of this verse and Leviticus 19:2, I suspect that the latter is being at least referenced in the former.

is also a matter of remaining a fool before God in knowledge. The fool is not empty-headed merely because there is some fact he does not yet know.²⁵ To be a fool is to be silly in the old sense of that word;²⁶ it is to be weak, to be deficient in judgment and sense. It is to be nothing (and King Benjamin reminds us that salvation *requires* that we recognize our nothingness; Mosiah 4:5, 8–9, 11).

Of course the silliness, deficiency, and nothingness of the foolishness recommended by Jacob are before God rather than human beings. Foolishness and humility before God do not require that we say and know nothing in our relations with others. Being dumbstruck is one kind of deficiency in judgment before God, but so are many kinds of speech. Neither does foolishness before God require that we have no confidence in what we say. Indeed, that foolishness may be the ground of our confidence before other human beings.²⁷ Nevertheless, the necessity of foolishness and humility before God means that if our theology is to be apocalyptic, it must demonstrate its foolishness before God in some way. One person may do so by an explicit, sincere statement acknowledging the not only tentative but foolish character of her speculation. Another person may do it in a style that reveals his humility.²⁸ Surely there are also other ways. In addition, I think that some theological methods are more conducive to demonstrating that godly foolishness, including hermeneutic and narrative theologies, because they make questioning and being questioned rather than claiming the center of their methods.

Sometimes nothing is so helpful as an example, and in philosophy sometimes nothing is so rare. Let me try, therefore, to give an example of theological thinking that I hope will show how theology can be apocalyptic, showing our foolishness as thinkers before God as well

25. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “fool,” from the Latin *follem*, “bellows,” so “one full of air,” “an empty-headed person.”

26. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “silly.” The older meaning was “deserving compassion, defenseless,” “weak,” or “rustic.”

27. D&C 121:45 suggests as much.

28. I take this to be characteristic of David Paulsen’s work: students love his classes, not so much because of what he teaches as because of what he is when he teaches. In my day, David Yarn was a popular philosophy teacher for the same reason.

as the nearness of his kingdom. My example will be the problem of theodicy, and my thinking about that problem will rely heavily on the work of Paul Ricoeur.²⁹

As classically formulated, the problem of theodicy is the seeming impossibility of believing four propositions at the same time, four propositions that most religious people believe:

1. God is all-loving.
2. God is all-powerful.
3. God is all-knowing.
4. Evil exists.

The argument is that if God is all-loving, all-powerful, and all-knowing, then the existence of evil is inexplicable, for such a God *could* create a world without evil—he has the power and the knowledge to do so—and he *would* create it, for his love would require that he do so. According to the argument, therefore, the existence of God is incompatible with the existence of evil. For many, the suppressed conclusion is that it is irrational to believe in God if one recognizes the existence of evil, as most people do.

Notice, first of all, that neither the prophets nor scripture has given us these propositions as they are understood philosophically. These are philosophical interpretations of scriptural and prophetic statements, and we must not assume without question that the translation of prophetic discourse into philosophical discourse is innocent, retaining the meaning of the former in the latter.

Theologians have responded to the problem of theodicy in a variety of ways. For example, some have denied the reality of evil.³⁰ Others have argued that the problem is set up so that it demands that God do what

29. See, for example, Paul Ricoeur, *Le mal* (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1996). To a lesser degree, I also depend on the work of Philippe Nemo, *Job and the Excess of Evil* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998).

30. David Ray Griffin argues that all theologians prior to the twentieth century disputed the existence of evil. *God, Power, and Evil: A Process Theodicy* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 2004). I suspect that, if he is right, they did so as a consequence of assuming creation *ex nihilo*. If God created the world from absolutely nothing, then one can argue that either evil is not real or he created it. Latter-day Saints avoid that dilemma by not believing that the world was created *ex nihilo*.

is logically contradictory. That means that the problem itself is faulty. For example, one might argue that, by definition, embodied beings are necessarily passive as well as active. They can be acted on; to be embodied is to be able to be affected. In technical terms, it is to be *pathetic*, to have things happen to one. But to be pathetic is to suffer in the broad sense of the word.³¹ If an argument from the nature of embodiment were successful, it would show that it is logically contradictory to create a world without creating suffering. Perhaps one could argue that if there is suffering in the broad sense, then it is impossible to avoid there being evil, suffering in the narrow sense, as well. If so, then it seems that the three characteristics describing God could continue to be held without contradicting the claim that evil exists. That is because the contradiction between God's character and the existence of evil is derived only if one supposes that God logically could create embodied beings that are not affected, and *that* involves contradiction.

Another tack is to take up the problem of theodicy in terms of the quantity of suffering: "Why didn't God create the world with less suffering in it than he did?" Most answers to this question accord with Leibniz's answer in some way: this is the best of all possible worlds; if there were more or less evil in the world, the world would be defective. The problem is that, by asserting that the way we find the world is, inexplicably, the way things must be, Leibniz's answer runs the risk of denying the evil of evil. If I say that the evil of the world is a necessity, then I no longer call it evil. At best, perhaps I express my lack of understanding; at worst, I acquiesce to or become complicit in its presence. The only answer of this sort that does not go in the direction of denying evil is one that goes in the direction of faith: though we cannot explain the degree of suffering we see in the world, we have to trust God as we confront that suffering. Of course, to say that I do and must trust God is not to answer the question, "Why isn't there less suffering in the world?" It is to deny that there is an answer for us. This may be the best of all possible worlds, but the claim that it is requires

31. For our purposes, suffering is not best defined as "feeling pain" because feeling pain is a species of suffering, of being affected.

an incredible amount of optimism, an optimism explicable only on the basis of faith and, so, an optimism that begs the question.

There is yet another way of understanding the problem itself to be the problem: As usually set forth, the problem of theodicy assumes that God's power is essential to his being; the claim that God is omnipotent is crucial to the problem. That may sound reasonable at first, but it is questionable. Latter-day Saints are hardly alone in seeing in God, not power, but a kind of powerlessness, namely the holding back, allowing, suffering, persuasion, charity, gentleness, and absence of compulsion that is described so eloquently in Doctrine and Covenants 121:41–46 and that informs much of the scripture that we share with other Christians. That seeming limitation of power appears to be correlate with his power to save, perhaps the only power essential to his divinity. I take it that this way of understanding God's power is among the reasons why the scriptures show us a very human God rather than an omnipotent one: After dinner, Abraham walks with God's messengers and perhaps with God himself, showing them the way to Sodom, and God bargains with Abraham over the fate of those who live there (Genesis 18). It is one thing to speak of God as all-powerful when we praise him and to mean what we say when we do. It is another to assume that our praise can be parsed directly into logical propositions that we can use to solve theological conundra such as the problem of theodicy. Whatever the case for dogmatic or rational theology, scriptural assertions of God's power are enriched and, therefore, complicated by instances in which his power is limited and, even more, by the importance he himself puts on his patience, persuasion, and love.

Still another way a Christian might respond to the problem of theodicy is to object to the question it asks. It would not be unreasonable for a Christian to argue that since even Christ suffered on the cross, with suffering incomparable to any of our own, we have no right to ask why *we* suffer. To do so is impertinent, perhaps impertinent to the point of blasphemy. To complain about my suffering when faced with the suffering of Jesus Christ is, implicitly, to deny the gravity and effect of his suffering. I have no right to ask why I suffer. Here is another way to put the same point: if Jesus Christ asked the question

of God's justice while on the cross—"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34)—we have no right to think that we can avoid the same question. And if he did not receive an answer in mortality, we have no reason to think that we can.

But thinking about the problem of evil need not be a complaint about *my* suffering. It could be a question about the suffering of others. As the name we have given to the problem suggests, our question is about God's justice as a whole, including his dealings with others. The question is not only a personal complaint, and the scriptures themselves show prophets from Abraham to Joseph Smith sometimes questioning God's justice. In fact, it is not unreasonable to construe their ability to question God's justice as a sign of their righteousness before God. Abraham's bargain with God over Sodom occurs immediately after the Lord has described him as someone who "will command his children . . . to do justice and judgment" (Genesis 18:19). Thus the Christian argument puts me in my place, but it does not dissipate the question of theodicy, for as a general question rather than a complaint, the question may be rooted in Christlike compassion for our fellows rather than in a demand for a justification of my suffering.

My intuition as a philosophy teacher of Latter-day Saint students is that most Mormons who have tackled the problem have done so by reformulating the second proposition of its traditional formulation, namely that God is all-powerful. They do so by redefining what it means to be all-powerful in such a way that the paradox will disappear. That solution neatly dissolves the problem, but many Saints are uncomfortable with the limitation that the solution puts on God's power.

I have described a few of the ways of dealing with the problem of evil. There are any number of others, but I believe we see a pattern here. When we deal with the problem of theodicy, we most often, perhaps always, find ourselves at an impasse that requires us either to give up, to reformulate the question, or to show how the problem is itself problematic, and even when we do seem to have dissolved the problem, it reappears soon afterward in some new form. However, behind that impasse is a perhaps surprising assumption. If I look at the problem, its solutions, and its problems with a *merely* theological eye, I find in it

the attempt to represent rationally a god who is God and yet allows the evil we encounter. I create a god in my own image, a rational representation of God, and then I try to resolve—to dissolve—the problem of evil; I try to make it go away. I commit idolatry. Then I pretend that the enemy of God is either unreal or not really an enemy.

However, there is yet another way to think about the problem—namely, as a problem that makes things more difficult, a problem that will not go away. Though the problem of theodicy can be a legitimate topic of philosophical and theological thought, and philosophical and theological thought can be legitimate pursuits, even apocalyptic ones, seeing the problem of theodicy as one that makes thinking more difficult rather than as a problem to be dissolved tends toward apocalyptic theology.

Notice that the Christian talks about the problem of evil differently than does the philosopher. This difference is not just a matter of taste or style. It has everything to do with the difference between what each kind of discourse does. Sometimes we treat scripture and revelation as if they were simplified scientific explanations of things, but I think that is a mistake, and sometimes a serious one, for it assumes that science is the measure of all discourse. Though religious discourse may offer us explanations, its purpose is not explanatory, but soteriological: it is concerned, not with telling us how the world and the things in the world are (at least not in the way that science does),³² but with telling us about God's power to save and how we can be saved. Given its purposes, revelation ignores the problem of theodicy—which, since it is a philosophical/theological problem rather than a religious one, is not the same as ignoring the problem we face in reconciling the evil we encounter with our faith in God—and that revelation ignores the problem is deeply suggestive. Of course, revelation is not blind to suffering.³³ Christian revelation often reminds us that we must be deeply concerned with suffering, especially with the suffering of others and

32. And its explanations are not scientific, not even in a primitive way. For a discussion of how I understand scripture and, therefore, religious discourse, see my "Scripture as Incarnation."

33. Christ's healing miracles were not incidental to his mission. Indeed, in Jesus's first sermon he identifies himself as the one appointed "to heal the brokenhearted, to

with our own spiritual suffering. God wills neither, and he offers answers to both. But Christian concern is with the proper, Christlike response to that suffering, not with explaining its logical compatibility with God's existence. One can even imagine a Christian arguing that, as a speculative rather than a practical problem, the problem of theodicy distracts us from the existential problem.

Obviously I am sympathetic to the charge that the philosophical problem of evil and suffering is a distraction. However, since concern for the philosophical problem can be a concern for justice, it is not enough to ignore that problem as a distraction. My sympathy does not extend to agreement. Nevertheless, even if the problem of evil is not merely a distraction, it is also not a purely philosophical, theoretical problem. In the end, it *is* a problem for action, and philosophical speculation has little place among the actions required when we respond concretely to suffering and evil. At the second coming not only will every knee bow and every tongue confess, but also the lame and the halt will be cured.³⁴ But confession and cure show themselves in the type and shadow of our concrete responses to suffering rather than in rational speculation. They show themselves in the confession we make and the succor we offer in a world remade by our encounter with God.

Of course, it does not follow that careful thought is irrelevant or unnecessary, and by "careful thought" I am not just referring to the planning we must do to make our actions fruitful. Careful thought may include the rigorous analyses of rational philosophy. Philosophy does many things. It has many purposes, including the pleasure of philosophy, a good that does not require that I justify it by showing how it leads to some other good. But among its other purposes is that of showing us the limits of reason. When we think of philosophers who are concerned with the limits of reason, perhaps we most often first think of Immanuel Kant and the first critique. Kant says that knowing the limits of pure reason will remove obstacles that stand

preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind" (Luke 4:18; cf. Isaiah 61:1).

34. See Mosiah 3:5, where we see the first coming as a figure of the second. See also such passages as Jeremiah 30:17 and Alma 41:4.

in the way of practical reason (Bxxv) and will make it possible to take morality and religion seriously (Bxxx–xxxi).³⁵ But Kant was neither the first nor the last philosopher to think that we needed to consider the limits of reason. In fact, thinkers whose goal it is to make things difficult—Kierkegaard and Nietzsche come to mind—generally do so as a means of showing the limits of reason.

In the fifth century, Pseudo-Dionysius gave us negative theology, not to demonstrate that we cannot have faith nor to attack religion, but to show us the limits of reason when reason tries to talk about God. He believed that by opposing negative theology to affirmative theology, a third way will show itself to us, the way of revelation. Pseudo-Dionysius explicitly wanted to do apocalyptic theology and saw negative theology as a means for doing so. Others, such as Maimonides, have taken a similar approach. As I read Kierkegaard, though he does not do negative theology, he does show us the limits of reason by making it less philosophically clear how to understand what it means to be a Christian. For example, his claim in *Fear and Trembling* that Abraham can only be understood by means of the absurd is a claim that we *can* understand Abraham, but not philosophically.³⁶ Similarly, we can understand the problem of theodicy as demonstrating the limit of reason confronted by evil and, therefore, as an aid to foolishness, reminding us of God’s greatness and our own nothingness.

However, to see the problem as demonstrating the limits of reason is not to reject reason. We can neither reject nor avoid it. We ought not to wish to do so. For reason not only helps us find solutions to problems, but it sometimes sharpens the problem. I think the long history of the problem of theodicy is sufficient evidence that we are unlikely to find a solution that puts an end to that problem once and for all. The merely theological response is to take up the question of theodicy as a free-floating philosophical problem, but if we do, the most we

35. These are standard references for Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, referring to pages of the B edition.

36. For more discussion of this claim, see my “Room to Talk: Reason’s Need for Faith,” in *Revelation, Reason, and Faith: Essays in Honor of Truman G. Madsen*, ed. Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2002), 85–120.

can gain from it is the pleasure of philosophical thought. Though that is not a good to be ignored, few who are religious can deal with this issue *only* for its philosophical pleasure. The apocalyptic alternative is that the problem is a philosophical goad, a spur, an itch that will not go away, for it challenges our faith even when it points to the need for faith. Every call invites a response, and in doing so it disturbs the status quo.³⁷ The problem of theodicy calls to us, challenging our faith and, by doing so, inviting us to respond. It invites us to see the world as still awaiting the second coming even if we live in a world that has been figured by the presence of Christ.

For some, faith fails in the face of that challenge by the problem of theodicy, but not for most. Most of us continue to believe even as we struggle with the problem. In fact, we struggle with the problem *because* we believe. We struggle only because we have faith. If we find the problem of theodicy to be a real problem rather than only an intellectual game, that is evidence that we have faith. Thus, by continuing to be a problem—by the fact that we seem unable to find any solution to the problem of theodicy that does not merely shift it someplace else where it reappears in a new and slightly different guise—the problem of theodicy shows us the limit of reason and the necessity of trust. The problem of evil and suffering is intractable to our powers of reason. As believers we find ourselves foolish before it. Ultimately the only thing to which it is tractable is moral and faithful response: action.

Thus, the intractability of the problem of theodicy can be positive in Christian life rather than merely negative. First, it can continue to serve as a goad. That it is intractable can continue to remind us that evil and suffering are real and that they require our action. Second, the rational difficulty of the problem can provide an impetus for recognizing that faith is prior to reason.³⁸

To paraphrase something that Heidegger said of theology and that Kierkegaard could have said, the problem of theodicy may only render faith more difficult—that is, render it more certain that faith-

37. Jean-Louis Chrétien, *L'Appel et la Réponse* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1992), 20.

38. Notice that I do not think faith is opposed to reason. I am not a fideist.

fulness cannot be gained through reason, but only through faith.³⁹ So, the problem of theodicy continues to be important to believers for two reasons: because it points to the ground of our belief by showing a limit of reason and because it reminds us that we must not neglect to respond to evil and suffering as Christian faith calls us to respond.⁴⁰ When the problem of theodicy does these things for us, we find ourselves not only awaiting but expecting the coming of Christ and seeing his nearness. When it does these things, it is apocalyptic.

In the end, therefore, the problem with merely theological answers to the problem of theodicy is that every one of them looks for a way to *integrate* evil into our understanding of the world. But in the end it is evil to do so, to explain evil, to tame it, no longer to be horrified by it. If evil ceases to be horrible, then we cease to struggle with it. The shadow of the apocalypse is concrete struggle with evil, not abstract thought about it, which may well be relevant but is never enough. Our horror in response to transcendent evil is one with our eschatological hope for the good of the kingdom that is to come, and that hope makes no sense apart from the fight against evil. Only if the problem of theodicy is genuinely a problem—only if all solutions ultimately fail in this world without the Apocalypse, the Revelation of Jesus Christ—can we continue to know that evil is genuinely evil.

I hope it is not too much of a conceit to suggest that thinking about the problem of theodicy has a relation to the struggle for justice that is similar to the relation of prayer to that struggle: for the apocalyptic Christian theologian, the problem of theodicy is a kind of prayer.⁴¹ To pray is to turn oneself toward God in response to his call. The believer who approaches the problem of theodicy also turns toward God,

39. Martin Heidegger, "Phenomenology and Theology," trans. James G. Hart and John C. Maraldo, in *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 46.

40. Though this is not the place to explore the question, it may be that these two things are really one.

41. For a discussion of the phenomenology of prayer, see Jean-Louis Chrétien, "The Wounded Word," in *Phenomenology and the "Theological Turn": The French Debate* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000). I think that Chrétien pays insufficient attention to the fact that much prayer is petitionary and that the believer hopes that the requests of his petitions will be granted, but in spite of that his description of prayer is very helpful.

responding to the question of God's justice as to a call. At the same time, because that person's intellectual powers fail in responding to the call, the believer recognizes her own weakness, her own foolishness, a recognition requisite to prayer. And as every prayer ought, in responding to the problem of theodicy, the believer praises God's goodness, wisdom, power, and sovereignty and prays for his kingdom to come—for the Apocalypse (Matthew 6:9–10, 13). Those are, after all, the divine attributes that give rise to the question that calls us to respond. Without those divine attributes, there is no problem of evil, only evil. Without the promise of the Apocalypse, there is no answer to the problem, only intellectual confusion and continued evil.

Finally, as is also true of prayer, to deal with the problem of theodicy is to be concerned for others beside oneself. Just as one always prays in community with others who pray, even when one prays only for oneself—"our Father" rather than "my Father" in the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9)—the problem of theodicy is a concern for others as well as oneself. When thought apocalyptically, prayer and thinking come together in the problem of theodicy, and because it continues to remain a problem, the problem of theodicy can allow us to continue the prayerful thought of belief and a believing awareness of the nearness of the kingdom of God.

Theology is possible that, in responding to God's call, demonstrates our foolishness before God, praises God, and opens the possibility of seeing the world anew by seeing the nearness of God's kingdom (divine life with others) both in time and space. Some theologies are better at doing that than others. As I said, I believe that hermeneutic and narrative theologies—to which I would add liturgical, ritual, scriptural, and pastoral or practical theologies, as well perhaps as a theology modeled on what some Protestants call canonical theology (without the forced assumption of scriptural inerrancy)⁴²—are more likely to be apocalyptic.

42. Canonical theology is a theology of the canon, of scripture. It seeks to understand the scriptures in their own terms rather than as documents to be deciphered so as to conform to some implied, preexisting theology.

However, ultimately the question of whether our theologies are, on the one hand, merely theology and, therefore, idolatrous or, on the other hand, apocalyptic is not a methodological question. It is a question of character and spirit—our own, our audience’s. That is why, though some theologies may be more amenable to idolatry than others, none are immune to it. As human beings, *we* are not immune to it. Whether a theology is apocalyptic depends on what the theologian does and the experience of his or her audience, not on the content of what the theologian says or on the method the theologian uses. Understanding the difference between theology *simpliciter* and apocalyptic theology brings us to the understanding that the danger of theology is ultimately the danger of human character: we may believe that the theological work we do is directed toward God and be wrong; we may be right that it is, but our audience may fail to take it up as the apocalyptic theology that it is for us. The attempt to do apocalyptic theology can go wrong in many ways, all of them ways in which *we* are wrong.

It does not follow that we ought to avoid all theology. Rather, it follows that we ought not to do theology unaware of the danger of failure, of the danger that our theology may be a species of idolatry. Apocalyptic theology should be our goal, but idolatrous theology is its ever-present danger. If we do theology, whatever other reasons we have—and there are other good reasons—we must do it to announce “the Lord is nigh” (D&C 1:12) and to proclaim the revelations of the restoration (D&C 1:18), remaining weak, simple (D&C 1:23), and prayerful,⁴³ yet confident in the presence of God that figures our lives (D&C 121:45).

43. Matthew 7:7: “Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you.” This and its variations appear over and over again in scripture.

