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## Profound Depth in a Slender Book

Kevin Christensen

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## PROFOUND DEPTH IN A SLENDER BOOK

Kevin Christensen

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

Occasionally, an LDS author puts out a slender little book that displays a profound depth and insight that belies its size. Truman Madsen's *Eternal Man* is one such book, one that forever changed the way I viewed the faith in which I was raised. In that case, Madsen asked a set of basic philosophical questions and compared the LDS answers with those provided by a range of non-LDS and generally famous philosophers. Madsen commented in his preface that

Letters of praise for their “objectivity” (which usually means that I have named and highlighted some live alternatives) miss my feeling that such merit as they have is in their subjectivity. Their primary gesture is toward inner echoes, toward, as it were, the nerve endings of the spirit.<sup>1</sup>

Blake Ostler's *Fire on the Horizon* is another book of relatively small size with a remarkable ideological depth, also directed toward those same “nerve endings of the spirit.” Ostler is a well-known figure in LDS intelligentsia, most famous, perhaps, for his 1987 *Dialogue* essay on “The Book of Mormon as an Expansion of an Ancient Source” and his more recent volumes from Kofford books in the Exploring Mormon Thought series. This little volume ought to contribute significantly to his reputation as an important voice in the LDS community.

He explains the potent metaphor of his title:

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1 Truman Madsen, *Eternal Man* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1970), viii.

A fire on the horizon is a tremendous challenge. The horizon defines the boundary — the scope of what is accessible to us ... the horizon is the edge of the world. Yet a fire on the horizon is something more. A fire on the horizon may be a dangerous messenger that we must heed. The fire on the horizon illuminates merely where the horizon is located, but also portends an immense power to which we must pay attention.”<sup>2</sup>

The fires which he wants us to explore and better understand — by changing our current vantage points to more telling and revealing perspectives — are the temple and the Atonement. “For twenty years,” he explains, “I attended the temple, bored out of my gourd. I kept going, but did not get much out of it. The endowment was just the same endless repetition that held no meaning for me.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Ostler mentions that Soren Kierkegaard’s had written a book titled *Endless Repetition*, which he compares to a “mirror for a life that is stuck in just going through the motions without meaning,” which is defined as the “unrepentant life.” The response to endless repetition and meaninglessness is to move, to change perspectives, and “moving to see the fire on the horizon.”<sup>4</sup> He explains that “All the boredom I created in my encounter with the endowment changed with a change of my heart.”<sup>5</sup> The classic film, *Groundhog Day*, illustrates the principle. How can you change the quality of your life if you cannot change the circumstances?

Ostler begins asking “Why?” about every event, action, word, symbol, and personal encounter, and brings his whole heart and mind into the experience. The book is an invitation to the reader to accompany a master teacher through his own change of perspective. He draws upon Kant and Kierkegaard at times, but this is not a book of analytical philosophy.

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2 Blake Ostler, *Fire on the Horizon: A Meditation on the Endowment and  
of Atonement* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2013), vii.

3 Ostler, *Fire on the Horizon*, p. x.

4 Ostler, *Fire on the Horizon*, p. x.

5 Ostler, *Fire on the Horizon*, p. xi.

Thus, there is a reason that Joseph Smith could not have been a theologian — and it is not merely because he lacked the training and talent to be one. Theology is immoral from the Christian viewpoint to the extent that it objectifies God. The Christian cannot be objective about the matter at all, for a Christian is a person seeking a passionate *I-Thou* relationship.<sup>6</sup>

According to Ostler, Joseph Smith saw that “rituals and ordinances are the language of the sacred,”<sup>7</sup> and he then leads into a discussion of “The Language of Ritual Viewed from Within.” This is not an objective analysis, a dispassionate dissection, but becomes, as promised on the cover, “a meditation on the Endowment and love of aAtonement.” He draws on his philosophical training at times, but his mode is personal and passionate — his voice direct and intimate. He takes us with him as he adjusts his perspective on the endowment and on the Atonement so that if we go with him, we can share his view. While discussing Kant and Kierkegaard, he stays at the level of basic principles rather than extensive analysis. He is likely to quote Martin Buber’s *I and Thou* as well as Joseph Smith and Brigham Young.

Because the endowment is a ritual drama, Ostler does not pretend to provide a definitive, final word but rather an illuminating exploration with an implicit invitation to continue the journey on our own. The endowment is not an allegory in which each element has a one-to-one correspondence with something outside but is rather a symbolic drama in which the comparisons we can make are open-ended.

I’ve read several books and essays over the years that have provided mind-expanding contexts and interesting comparisons that shed light on the temple experience. I’ve also read attempts to dissect the endowment by purported sources

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6 Ostler, *Fire on the Horizon*, p. 9.

7 Ostler, *Fire on the Horizon*, p. 9.

which strike me as unhelpful attempts that offer generalized superlatives of praise — void of useful, directed insight.

I learned to appreciate Ostler's abilities a few decades ago. While driving to the Oakland Temple, my wife and I read his *BYU Studies* article, "Clothed Upon"<sup>8</sup> and indeed found that knowledge enhanced our appreciation of the temple experience. I've also learned much from writings by Hugh Nibley, John W. Welch, and other LDS scholars. I've gained useful insights from Margaret Barker, including her essay called "Belonging in the Temple."<sup>9</sup> I've often found helpful knowledge directly relevant to the LDS endowment from Mircea Eliade's *The Myth of Eternal Return: or Cosmos and History*. I've been helped by Joseph Campbell and Northrop Frye in several ways. As much as I have learned from such writers and as much as I recommend them, I still received much that is fresh, helpful, and new by following Ostler's exploration of the Fire on the Horizon. Highly recommended.

*Kevin Christensen has been a technical writer since 1984, since 2004 working in Pittsburgh, PA. He has a B.A. in English from San Jose State University. He has published articles in Dialogue, Sunstone, the FARMS Review of Books, the Journal of Book of Mormon Studies, Insights, the Meridian Magazine, the FARMS Occasional Papers (Paradigms Regained: A Survey of Margaret Barker's Scholarship and Its Significance for Mormon Studies), Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem, and in collaboration with Margaret Barker, an essay in Joseph Smith Jr.: Reappraisals after Two Centuries. He lives with his wife Shauna in Bethel Park, PA.*

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8 Blake Ostler, "Clothed Upon: A Unique Aspect of Christian Antiquity," in *BYU Studies* 22/1 (1982).

9 Margaret Barker, "Belonging in the Temple" (Canterbury: Department of Politics at University of Kent, 2007), <http://www.margaretbarker.com/Papers/Belonginginthetemple.pdf>.



