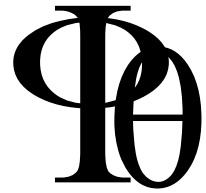


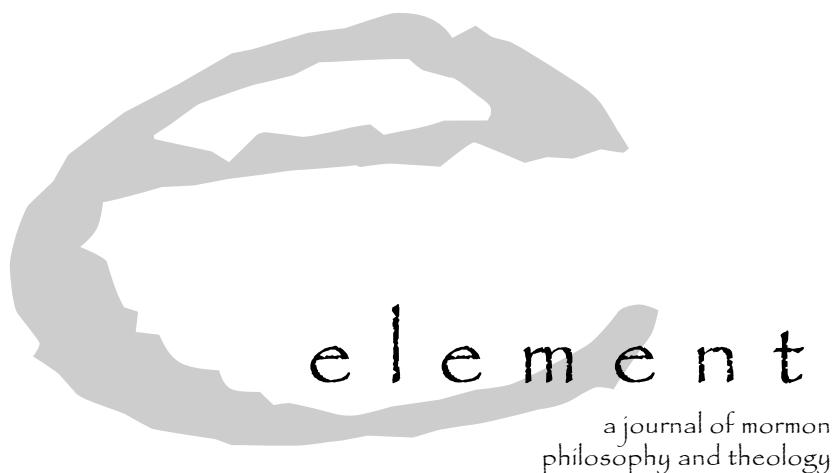


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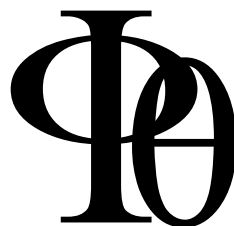


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Element: A Journal of Mormon Philosophy and Theology is a continuation of the journal that was sponsored by the former Society for Mormon Philosophy and Theology. The demand for and interest in the philosophical assessment of the Latter-day Saint tradition continues to be strong, and the journal seeks contributors both who desire to develop the Latter-day Saint traditions and those who endeavor in good faith to critique them.

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Welcome back to *Element: A Journal of Mormon Philosophy and Theology*. After our successful relaunch in 2024, *Element* is back bigger and better than ever. We are particularly excited that this year we will publish two issues, with this being the first. It seems like those interested in writing original theological or philosophical work in the Latter-day Saint tradition is growing. We are grateful to play a small part in this movement.

We want to acknowledge our gratitude to the team at Greg Kofford Books for hosting *Element*. They have been amazing to work with. Truly we could not do this without them. In particular, we want to thank Loyd Isao Ericson and Raistlyn Camphuysen for their support in publishing our journal.

We also want to thank all the internal and external reviewers who took time out of their busy schedules to help us give excellent feedback and suggestions to the authors who submitted original work. Your support is vital to our success, so thank you!

Finally, we want to thank all those who submitted articles and book reviews to be considered for publication at *Element*. As this volume demonstrates, there is some excellent content out there. Indeed, it is a privilege to examine your work. Sadly, we are unable to publish everything that comes across our desks. However, we want to encourage everyone to keep up the good work and feel free to submit your work to *Element*.

We appreciate everyone's contribution to *Element* and what we are attempting to do here. Welcome aboard!

Peter Carmack
Editor



War is Hell: The Ethics of War in the Book of Mormon

by Margaret M. Toscano

Does the Book of Mormon justify or condemn war? This question is relevant whether the book is history that informs, literature that illuminates, theology that explores, vision that inspires, or some combination of these modes. It is important to note that the Book of Mormon, like Homer's *Iliad*, begins and ends in tragedy. At the outset, Lehi and his family and friends flee the prophesied destruction of Jerusalem to establish, at God's command, a new civilization in a new world. One thousand years later, this society ends tragically in another prophesied destruction. This narrative arc is pocked with stories of bloody battles that contain numerous conflicting justifications and condemnations of war.

Warfare in the Book of Mormon is part of a patterned sequence that begins with Christian conversion, leads to prosperity, devolves into unchristian and contentious inequality, and culminates in war—sometimes justified, sometimes condemned, and sometimes paradoxically both. The purpose of this essay is to explore these stories and the host of troubling, unresolved, yet strangely relevant questions they raise regarding the consequences and morality of warfare. I will use a series of questions as a rhetorical device to keep alive an ongoing tension that illustrates the futility of looking for clear or easy answers.

The Book of Mormon has been used by members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints both to justify war and to condemn it.¹ Does one of these positions dominate the book itself? Does the Book of Mormon take an ethical stance in relationship to war? Does it contain a unified teaching on the morality of war? How do these questions relate to larger issues for LDS scholars concerning the development of theological interpretations of the scriptures? This paper concludes that these questions can be explored only by examining the overarching narrative and thematic structures of the book. Such an analysis suggests that the Book of Mormon equates war with the chains of hell and that actual war creates physical captivity, which is equated with spiritual bondage as well. Even a self-defensive war, while temporarily defending liberty, is ultimately part of a larger revenge cycle that leads to utter destruction for those on both sides of the conflict. The only thing that puts an end to violence is the inner transformation of the human heart, as especially illustrated in the book by the conversion of the Lamanites on many occasions. But such conversions never lead to lasting peace for the civilization at large because the human heart cannot be coerced toward belief or peace. Thus, the book provides no final solution to the problem of war, nor can the questions raised in this paper regarding warfare be completely answered.²

METHODOLOGY

In my analysis, I employ three major principles of literary analysis to uncover the Book of Mormon's theology of war, and I use narrative theory

1. In LDS President Gordon B. Hinckley's two conference talks (2001 and 2003) during the Iraq War, he uses the Book of Mormon to promote peace while giving reasons for a just war: Gordon B. Hinkley, "The Times in Which We Live," *Ensign* (November 2001): 72–74; Gordon B. Hinckley, "War and Peace," *Ensign* (May 2003): 78–81. The most extensive study of *Warfare in the Book of Mormon* (Deseret Book, 1990) is the collection of essays edited by Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin by this title. Book reviewer David B. Honey says the most important contribution of this volume is its attempt to contextualize the Book of Mormon's "ideology and practice of warfare" from "a variety of paradigms, ancient and modern, practical and theoretical." David B. Honey, "Paradigms and Pitfalls of Approach to Warfare in the Book of Mormon." *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011* 3, no.1 (1991): 118.

2. I want to acknowledge the input of my husband, Paul Toscano, on this paper. Not only is he a fine editor for catching stylistic problems, but he has been an important theological sounding board for my ideas over the almost forty-seven years of our marriage.

to understand how the book works as a religious text by its structure, voice, themes, and characters.³

First, narrative structures reveal more than isolated passages because they set up contexts for interpretation. According to Aristotle, the most important element of a text is the arrangement of its parts and their inter-relationships—what we translate as “plot,” but what he calls the arrangement of the deeds, in Greek the “*sustasis ton pragmaton*” (*suvstasiV tw:n pragmatwn*).⁴ It is the arrangement and relationship of the parts that gives an interpretive framework for understanding the whole.⁵

Second, internal gaps or contradictions in a text are crucial because they can reveal problem areas where the author and text show concerns or questions, perhaps unconsciously. Such tensions provide a mechanism for deconstructing or unraveling the complexity of the competing voices within the text.⁶ Third, not every character or narrator can be seen as completely reliable, nor does any one voice represent the ultimate “truth” of the text. Rather, a dialogic approach is necessary to reveal what themes emerge from the interaction of various perspectives and voices. Following the scholarship of Mikhail Bakhtin, D. C. Kidd and E. Castano argue that it is the polyphonic nature of literary fiction, the presence of “a cacophony of voices,” that “prompts readers to enter a vibrant discourse

3. Other scholars have used literary theory to explore the themes and patterns of the Book of Mormon and other LDS scriptures. See Eugene England, “Why Nephi Killed Laban: Reflections on the Truth of the Book of Mormon,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 22, no. 3 (Fall 1989): 1–20; and Neal A. Lambert, *Literature of Belief: Sacred Scripture and Religious Experience* (Deseret Book, 1981), which includes articles by Steven P. Sondrup, Bruce W. Jorgensen, Richard Dilworth Rust, and George S. Tate on literary approaches to studying the scriptures and sacred texts.

4. Aristotle, *Poetics*, translated and introduction by Anthony Kenny (Oxford University Press, 2013), 25.

5. This involves metaphor (which shows similarities), metonymy (which connects tangential relationships), and synecdoche (which correlates the whole with parts)—all dominant literary tropes that reflect perceptions of reality. See Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 1997), 70–72.

6. Jonathan Culler concisely explains deconstruction theory in *Literary Theory*, 9–17; Mieke Bal’s work is foundational for narratology, and Peter Abbott gives a good overview of narrative theories. Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, 2nd ed. (University of Toronto Press, 1997); Porter Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2008).

with the author and characters.”⁷ And such a discourse encourages readers to understand complex human relationships that characterize every human society.

While I accept the Book of Mormon as a sacred, visionary text, the purpose of this paper is not to argue for the book’s authenticity or authorship. Rather, I contend that by looking at the book as a literary text, its theological themes become evident. By treating its characters and prophets as literary products, I am not arguing against its historicity. Rather, I seek to discover the ways the text takes seriously the ongoing admission by its major prophets that they themselves have weaknesses and that the book itself contains human errors. The title page of the Book of Mormon begins with the admission that faults may be found in the book because of the “mistakes of men.” Nephi, the first prophet in the book, says that his writing is not “mighty” and that what he has “written in weakness” will be “made strong” (2 Ne. 33:1–4). It is as though the weakness itself is what makes the writing strong, perhaps because it demands the reader’s engagement to interpret. Moroni, the last prophet in the book, puts forth a similar argument. When he expresses his fear that he will be mocked for his weakness in writing, the Lord tells him that his weaknesses make him humble, which rescues him from the pride that has destroyed his nation. The contradictions and problems in the text produced by the various voices create an uncertainty that avoids prideful certainty for its readers as well as its authors.⁸

For these reasons, I treat the prophet Mormon as a sometimes-unreliable narrator, but only sometimes. Overall, as redactor, Mormon arranges the book in a compelling way. He structures it not as a simple political or social history but as a morality tale to make sure that we get the main point. Every episode in the book tells the same story over and over again. Righteousness leads to prosperity, which leads to pride, which leads to war and captivity, which leads to repentance, which leads

7. Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, edited by Michael Holquist, translated by Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson (University of Texas Press, 1982); D. C. Kidd and E. Castano, “Reading literary fiction improves theory of mind,” *Science* 342 (2013): 1.

8. England and other critics use this admission by Book of Mormon prophets to suggest that certain scriptural ideas are not from God, or at least should be questioned, such as Nephi killing Laban.

to deliverance, which leads to peace and righteousness, which leads to prosperity, and back to pride and war.⁹

SIN LEADS TO CAPTIVITY, AND RIGHTEOUSNESS LEADS TO FREEDOM

This circular Book of Mormon theme echoes the Deuteronomic covenant of the Hebrew Bible.¹⁰ The pattern dominates not just the main storyline of the conflict between the Nephites and Lamanites, but every little subplot repeats the motifs of bondage and freedom, sin and redemption: Limhi and his people, the people of Ammonihah, the Jaredites, etc. By sheer repetition, the central theme is sounded louder and louder until its almost deafening finale that culminates with genocide and complete destruction. Moroni's editorial on the Book of Ether states this theme succinctly: "[T]his is a land which is choice above all other lands; wherefore he that doth possess it shall serve God or shall be swept off . . . this cometh unto you . . . that ye may repent . . . that ye may not bring down the fullness of the wrath of God upon you . . . whatsoever nation shall possess it shall be free from bondage, and from captivity" (Ether 2:10–12). Spiritual captivity leads to becoming a captive of war. War is hell in the Book of Mormon both literally and metaphorically because it always brings widespread suffering and because it typifies spiritual chains and the fire and brimstone of eternal torment.

LITERAL WAR EQUATED WITH SPIRITUAL HELL

Actual war creates captivity and physical bondage, while spiritual bondage creates the kinds of inequities that lead to war. The language of the Book of Mormon connects war and hell on every level. Nephi discourses about captivity, both on a temporal and a spiritual level. He asserts

9. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to interrogate various meanings of "prosperity," I agree with Fatimah Salleh and Margaret Olsen Hemmings that the Book of Mormon questions the "prosperity gospel" of certain Protestant thinkers.

10. In *The Great Code*, Northrup Frye describes this pattern as a U-shaped narrative, where the story goes from ascent to descent and back to ascent. But the Book of Mormon goes in the opposite direction, ending in descent or tragedy. Northrup Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (Mariner Books, 2002). England uses Frye in his analysis of the Book of Mormon, and Tate analyzes "The Typology of the Exodus Pattern in the Book of Mormon," in *Literature of Belief: Sacred Scripture and Religious Experience*, edited by Neal A. Lambert (Deseret Book, 1981), 245–62.

that the wickedness of the people results in “wars and rumors of wars” because they are captives to the devil, who also leads them down to actual hell (1 Ne. 14: 3–17). After the prophet Alma describes the literal bondage of some people captured by the Lamanites, he explains that they will only be delivered by the power of the Lord that will also save them from the “chains of hell” (Alma 5:5–7). Whether it is actual physical slavery resulting from being a captive in war, or another form of political-economic-social slavery, all of these serve as metaphors for spiritual slavery. “Remember the captivity of our fathers” is a formulaic phrase recited to remind the people both of the wages of sin and also to point them to the source of deliverance. The way out of captivity for the Book of Mormon prophets is to accept Christ’s gospel and follow the path he has set. War and contention are a sign of sin in the Book of Mormon, and both are put on every prophet’s list of destructive sins. Alma is “grieved for the iniquity of his people, yea for the wars, and the bloodsheds, and the contentions” (Alma 35:15). Thus, war, even when justified as self-defense, brings great sorrow. To “publish peace” is to work against war, as well as to preach the gospel of Christ. The prophet Mosiah succinctly lists the sins that are linked to war in his segment of the Book of Mormon. He argues that a system of kings, especially unrighteous kings, leads to inequality, depriving people of liberty, privileges, and rights that eventually promote general wickedness that leads to wars, contentions, bloodshed, stealing, plundering, whoredoms, and “all manner of iniquities” (Mosiah 29:32–36).

With its abundant examples of wars and contentions, the Book of Alma also connects war with sin and inequality: “[B]odies of many thousands are moldering in heaps upon the face of the earth; yea, and many thousands are mourning for the loss of their kindred. . . . And thus we see how great the inequality of man is because of sin and transgression, and the power of the devil” (Alma 28:11–13). Pride, inequality, and differences in class and in social and ethnic groups are given as the main causes of conflict throughout the Book of Mormon. The theme of social justice is dominant in each of the storylines of this sacred text, which includes awareness of racial inequality as well.¹¹ However, the book also reveals that

11. Salleh and Hemming’s two volume commentaries, *The Book of Mormon for the Least of These*, make a significant contribution to the theme of social justice in the Book of Mormon. Like me, they see the value of looking at competing voices and viewpoints in this sacred text, and acknowledging that the narrators struggle in imperfection to understand the hand of God. Fatimah Salleh and Margaret Olsen Hemming, *The Book of Mormon for the Least of These: 1 Nephi–Words of*

espousing justice for all creates the following problems: (1) Can equality be achieved while also championing liberty of thought and action? (2) Can freedom of belief coexist while promoting one religious faith, namely Christianity? (3) Can peace be achieved through war? The contradictory positions arising from these three tensions account for the competing war narratives in the Book of Mormon.

INIQUITY EQUALS INEQUITY

Our word “iniquity” comes from the same roots as “inequity”: both mean “not equal” or “not just.” Injustice in the Book of Mormon, then, is connected and presented as the heart of “gross wickedness.” Most often the text describes sins and virtues in general terms: “walk on the straight path,” “walk blameless before God,” “nothing unclean can enter the kingdom of God.” However, each prophet also gives a more specific list of sins and virtues. Nephi explains that because all should be equally privileged and none forbidden, there should be no priestcrafts, murdering, lying, stealing, envy, malice, contention, or whoredoms (2 Ne. 26). King Benjamin advises his people that they should not have a mind to injure, should live peaceably, give everyone their due, not let their children go without, help those in need, and not blame the unfortunate for what they lack (Mosiah 4:12–25). Mosiah says there should be peace and no more wars, contentions, stealing, plundering, murdering, or any manner of iniquity (Mosiah 29:14).

Pride is almost always presented as the worst sin in the Book of Mormon. But what does pride mean in the text? It is putting yourself above others and not having an open heart to God or compassion for others: being “stiff-necked” and “hard hearted.” Both terms show an inflexibility that does not allow for empathy or willingness to change and learn. It is pride that leads to contentions and wars, while equality leads to peace. “There was no inequality among them” is a sign of righteousness and peace. In 3 Nephi 6:14, the phrase “there began to be great inequality in the land” is the first sign that society is going very wrong again after four generations of peace. In 4 Nephi, after the two hundred years of peace following Christ’s appearance, social and economic classes begin to develop as the first sign of degeneration. Then the people divide into different churches “to get gain”; finally, they divide into two political bodies (with subdivisions): the Nephites and the Lamanites (although now

Mormon, vol. 1 (By Common Consent Press, 2020); and *The Book of Mormon for the Least of These: Mosiah–Alma*, vol. 2 (By Common Consent Press, 2022).

connotations are more political than racial). At first the Nephites are the believers in Christ, but eventually they become just like the Lamanites, although they perceive themselves as a rival political-social group, which begins to build up enmity leading to war, as Mormon describes in his eponymous section.

DEFENSIVE WAR VS. OFFENSIVE WAR

If war is a sign of spiritual sin, can it ever be justified? The usual interpretation of the Book of Mormon view on war is that it is only justified as a means of self-defense or a defense of liberty. Within the text, it is Captain Moroni who articulates this ideology when he rends his cloak and writes his famous “title of liberty” on it and makes everyone swear allegiance, which is ironic since it involves an element of force (Alma 46).¹² It is important to note that each of the Nephite prophets participates in self-defense. As a warrior society, they even wield swords themselves. In general, the rightness of fighting to defend one’s liberty is assumed by the people in the book, as Mormon explains in Alma 48: “Now the Nephites were taught to defend themselves against their enemies, even to the shedding of blood if it were necessary; yea, and they were also taught never to give an offense, yea, and never to raise the sword except it were against an enemy, except it were to preserve their lives” (v. 14). Moreover, “God would make it known unto them whither they should go to defend themselves against their enemies” (v. 16).¹³

The redactor Mormon praises Captain Moroni’s “perfect understanding” and the fact that he “did not delight in bloodshed” but in “the liberty and the freedom of his country” (Alma 48:11). In fact, Mormon sees Mo-

12. Relying on the theories of Renè Girard to argue for a nonviolent God, Mack C. Stirling uses the story of Captain Moroni’s “title of liberty” as a perfect example of mimetic sacrifice—the cloth from Moroni’s cloak standing in for the man himself as a sacrificial victim to unite the crowd for a righteous cause. Stirling also sees Moroni as employing “the economy of the violent sacred” to protect his people, in the name of God, which Stirling does not condone. And he praises the people of Ammon for their willingness to die rather than use violence. Mack C. Stirling, “Violence in the Scriptures: Mormonism and the Cultural Theory of Renè Girard,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 43, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 84.

13. Doctrine and Covenants 98 tells the Saints to “renounce war and proclaim peace” and gives them strict rules for using defensive war or violence for self-protection. What is left unexplained, though, is the human tendency to justify revenge in the name of self-defense.

roni as the model for everyone: “[I]f all men had been, and were, and ever would be, like unto Moroni, behold, the very powers of hell would have been shaken forever” (Alma 48:17). But war does not cease even though these men say they abhor it on some level. A “just” war is still destructive, as seen throughout the Book of Mormon. Chapters 45–62 in Alma’s segment are full of bloodshed and death.¹⁴ Ironically, Mormon says “there never was a happier time among the people of Nephi, since the days of Nephi, than in the days of Moroni” (Alma 50:23). And yet the peace is short-lived. Those who are defeated by the “righteous” always come back to get revenge. Even when “bad guys” like Amalickiah die, it does not stop the bloodshed cycle—“the work of death,” as Captain Moroni calls it. Moroni only maintains their cities “by the shedding of blood; for they had not taken any cities save they had lost much blood” (Alma 52:4).

Defensive warfare always turns offensive to a degree, as seen in Moroni’s maneuvers to lure the Lamanites out of their strongholds (Alma 52). War prisoners are used as slaves, which goes against the Nephite anti-slavery policy, though Captain Moroni justifies it because they cannot afford to feed these people without getting work out of them (Alma 53). Under Moroni’s righteous leadership, the Nephites win, but at what price? They only maintain their freedom by continuous preparations and fighting. The war passages in the book of Alma are those most frequently used to support war (as President Gordon B. Hinckley did in his 2003 general conference talk in response to the Iraq War).¹⁵ In fact, they are often portrayed as the book’s central view on war. But this is only part of the picture. The Book of Alma narrates many stories that, taken together,

14. Jack W. Welch gives a detailed list of all of the wars in the Book of Mormon, giving them names, citing their scriptural passages, and describing their tactics, causes, and results. Jack W. Welch, “Why Study Warfare in the Book of Mormon?” in *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, edited by Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin (Deseret Book, 1990), 6–15. Comparing Welch’s analysis to the “List of Wars Involving the United States” found in a Wikipedia article, we can concur with President Spencer W. Kimball’s 1976 statement in LDS conference: “We are a warlike people. . . . When threatened, we become antienemy instead of pro-kingdom of God; we train a man in the art of war and call him a patriot . . . perverting the Savior’s teaching.” “List of Wars Involving the United States,” Wikipedia, accessed May 28, 20205, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_wars_involving_the_United_States. Spencer W. Kimball, “The False Gods We Worship,” *Ensign* (June 1976): 4–5.

15. See also Hinkley, “The Times in Which We Live,” 72–74.

highlight the problems inherent in promoting defensive warfare. So, is there a justifiable reason to refuse to fight?

WHEN IS FORCE JUSTIFIED?

We return to the three central questions raised above: Can peace be achieved through war? Can righteousness and freedom both be promoted? And can there be liberty, justice, and equality at the same time? A central internal tension in the Book of Mormon lies in the conflict between the defense of liberty as the only reason for going to war and the promotion of Christianity as the one true belief system. The ideals of Christianity lead to peace, but is force justified to promote this religious ideology? Three important stories in the Book of Mormon reveal the complexity of this conflict: the pacifism of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies, Captain Moroni's opposition to the king-men, and the legal or illegal treatment of the dissenter Korihor. Each story presents readers with internal contradictions and ironic twists that ask them to question the simplistic good guys versus bad guys dichotomy that leads to conflict, cycles of revenge, and ethnic genocide.

THE ANTI-NEPHI-LEHIES

It is especially important to juxtapose the condemnation of the king-men (who refused to take up arms) with the people of Ammon (the Anti-Nephi-Lehies, who are praised for refusing to fight because they took an oath, which they cannot break). While it is true that there are very crucial differences between the two groups, important questions are raised by contrasting them: Why are all the pacifist Lamanites praised when military service is not merely a patriotic duty for the Nephites but an obligation a citizen cannot refuse?

The Anti-Nephi-Lehies confer about what they should do to defend themselves if they are attacked. "Now there was not one soul among all the people who had been converted unto the Lord that would take up arms against their brethren; nay they would not even make any preparations for war; yea, and also their king commanded them that they should not" (Alma 24:6). So, when the Lamanites who are angry at them go against them in violence, they prostrate themselves on the earth and call on the name of the Lord. One thousand and five of them die. And then many of the Lamanites who killed them are converted and lay down their weapons too. The narrator comments, "[T]hus we see that the Lord worketh in many ways to the salvation of his people" (Alma 24:27). But martyrdom

does not always lead to conversion since many people are willing to kill innocent victims without remorse, as history shows.¹⁶ This is evident in the Book of Ether where the Jaredites are so filled with hatred that they fight to the last man, even knowing they themselves will die, as is seen when Shiz swears he will kill Coriantumr with his last breath but succumbs first. It is no surprise that Moroni puts his abridgment of the history of the Jaredite people at what he thinks will be the end of his record, for it summarizes the themes of the whole Book of Mormon about war, sin, and destruction that Moroni has just witnessed among his own people.

When the Anti-Nephi-Lehies are threatened after their nonviolent resistance, Ammon decides to take this group to Zarahemla. This group tells the Nephites they will “be their slaves until we repair unto them the many murders and sins which we have committed against them” (Alma 27:8). But Ammon says slavery is not permitted and that the Lord has told him to bring them among the Nephites. When the judges send a proclamation to get the voice of the people about accepting them, the Nephites give this group the land of Jerushon and agree to protect them. Thus, justification is given in the Book of Mormon for complete pacifism, or so it seems. These Anti-Nephi-Lehies now are called the people of Ammon and continue to “look upon shedding the blood of their brethren with the greatest abhorrence” (Alma 27:28). However, they are protected by the Nephites, which means ultimately that others risk their lives to protect them. They realize this, of course, which is why they later send their sons to war (who have not taken the anti-bloodshed oath). Although this may suggest that it is not pacifism itself that motivates them but the seriousness of the oath they have taken, still it is clear that the people of Ammon are abhorred by the shedding of blood under any circumstances.

THE KING-MEN VS. THE FREEMEN

Alma 51 presents the case of the king-men versus the freemen: “those who were in favor of kings were those of high birth” and “were supported by those who sought power and authority over the people” (Alma

16. Hitler is the typical example given, along with the argument that Gandhi’s nonviolent passive resistance policy would not have worked against the Nazis. Norman G. Finkelstein’s 2015 careful analysis of the writings of Gandhi show that Gandhi himself was conflicted during World War II; he supported the Allies as the best hope for India, but he also thought the power of love could change someone like Hitler. Norman G. Finkelstein, *What Gandhi Says* (Fingerprint Publishing, 2015).

51:8). Moroni asks the government for official power to put the king-men to death, which he is granted. He is allowed to “go against those king-men, to pull down their pride and their nobility and level them with the earth” (51:17). He kills four thousand and puts the rest in prison: “and thus he put an end to the stubbornness and the pride of those people who professed the blood of nobility” (51:21). This is an example of class warfare as well as ethnic and religious warfare. While my sympathies are not with the aristocrats, still we wonder at the price paid for equality. We cannot help but note the irony of this statement: “Moroni was thus breaking down the wars and contentions among his own people, and *subjecting* them to peace and civilization” (Alma 51:22; my italics). Is there freedom if peace is forced and a single version of civilization is imposed on others?

Captain Moroni is Mormon’s hero as a defender of liberty (he names his son after him). But does Moroni believe in liberty for any except his own social and religious group? His conflict with the king-men is an interesting test case. Here, there may be a justification for violence against a belief system because the actions of the king-men threaten the very basis of the Nephite government since they want to overthrow democracy and the rule of the judges. That seems to be their crime, not their refusal to fight.¹⁷ The king-men are much more than war protesters; they are traitors against the democratic form of government. If they prevail, democracy itself will be destroyed, which is a crucial difference.¹⁸ Since Moroni gets permission from the government to put the king-men to death, he has the legal right for his action. But there is an element of vengeance on his part too, it seems. “Moroni commanded that his army should go against those king-men, to pull down their pride and their nobility and level them with the earth” (Alma 51:17). It sounds somewhat Cromwellian since he kills four thousand of these dissenters. Does Moroni’s action encourage violence against dissent of any kind? Where is the line between the freedom to dissent and actions so traitorous that they threaten the freedom to dissent itself? And even if the king-men are evil, does killing them put an end to dissent or stop violence?

17. It is beyond the scope of this article to summarize the theories and debates about just and unjust wars and methods. Oliver O’Donovan, Anglican priest and professor emeritus of Christian ethics, gives a good summary in his book *Just War Revisited* (Cambridge University Press, 2003).

18. I remember during the Vietnam War hearing ultra-conservative Mormons use the king-men as a justification for killing or imprisoning any draft dodgers or pacifists.

KORIHOR: DEMOCRACY AND FREEDOM OF BELIEF

During the time of Alma, the sons of Mosiah, Captain Moroni, and Helaman, an open democratic system of judges conflicts with a closed religious system of Christian socialism. Both systems promote equality, but only the democratic system promotes liberty. The Book of Mormon is full of admonitions against class systems that are themselves a sign of evil, but it is unclear if every group has the franchise (did women have a vote?).¹⁹ However, many issues are put before the people at-large, who control by their vote. In this system, slavery is forbidden, and the reader is told that people could not be imprisoned for their beliefs or for preaching their beliefs (Alma 30:7–9). At the same time, Christian beliefs are favored. Korihor is put in chains and taken before the judges and finally to Alma for promoting atheism and opposing Christianity and traditional religious laws, which then led people toward sinful behavior. Ironically, it is the people of Ammon (who are known for being very righteous) who first bind him. The narrator Mormon comments approvingly of their repression: “[T]hey were more wise than many of the Nephites” in the way they treated Korihor (Alma 30:20).

After asking the prophet Alma for a sign proving the existence of God, Korihor is struck dumb. He then claims to have repented of his atheism and petitions Alma to reverse the punishment. However, Alma says the Spirit revealed to him that Korihor would revert once the curse was lifted. So, Korihor remains mute and wanders as an outcast, eventually to be killed by the Zoramites. Presenting this story as a cautionary tale, Mormon concludes Korihor got what he deserved. But even if Korihor is really a person of evil intent and influence, what Alma and the others do to him is illegal under Nephite law, at least as stated in the text because a separation of church and state is mandated.²⁰ However, the demarcation

19. Ryan W. Davis examines evidence for a democratic government among the Nephites, and he asserts that the democratic features “predict that it will be inclined toward peace but comparatively strong in war.” He also points out challenges in the democratization evident in the text. Ryan W. Davis, “For the Peace of the People: War and Democracy in the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 16, no. 1 (2007): 43.

20. Stirling examines the story of Korihor as a perfect example of the mimetic scapegoat and mythological transformation to blame God for the violence against Korihor. He also compares Korihor and Abinadi to show how both of their communities condemn them for their beliefs. Stirling, “Violence in the Scriptures,” 92–94.

between these two realms is blurred and ignored more often than not. This raises the question whether religious dissenters should be punished if they do not belong to the church. The term “dissenter” itself is disturbing because it can be used broadly to describe anyone who disagrees.

This leaves the reader to wonder whether religious dissent should be defined and used broadly to describe any religious disagreement and therefore serve to justify punishing any dissent whatsoever from the “true” church. Does everyone need to belong to the same religion to live in peace? How can America be a land of liberty if everyone has to serve the one true God to live on it and survive? The Book of Mormon is so strongly Christian, it seems to condemn all non-Christians. But isn’t this view arrogant? Does it contribute to the very “stiff-neckedness” condemned by the text? The religious wars in the Book of Mormon are very bloody; nevertheless, the book’s main narrator, Mormon, describes his war hero, Captain Moroni, as working so he “might maintain that which was called by their enemies, the cause of the Christians” (Alma 48:10).²¹ The chief military leader of a purportedly free state actively engages in military campaigns that favor the Christian point of view. The conflict between these views is undeniable and problematic.

SIN, PUNISHMENT, AND THE FIRES OF HELL

Alma, like Nephi, preaches the doctrine of the two ways: you are either Righteous or evil. Mormon also preaches the two ways: “the whole human family of Adam . . . must stand to be judged of your works, whether they be good or evil” (Morm. 3:20). There often seems to be a simplistic equation between crime and punishment. Does it have this quality because Mormon is condensing larger narratives to present a morality lesson? Would the unredacted history be more complex, less obvious?²² Does the book’s polarizing language dichotomize people and encourage intolerance? And yet, the Book of Mormon appears to oppose the idea of ideological persecution. It depicts as good a society that allows differences of belief. However, the unrepentant in the church have their names blotted out (Alma 6:3), apparently because they would not repent of their sins. But it is not clear whether their sins concern their behaviors or beliefs.

21. Of course, the Christians are also persecuted by the non-Christians in the Book of Mormon, which increases the problems. The intolerance goes both ways.

22. However, the story of Alma the Elder’s people does break out of this simplistic crime and punishment motif. They are living in righteousness and peace and still come into bondage under the Lamanites (Mosiah 17–24).

It seems that the Book of Mormon presents two contradictory Gods: the God of vengeance, who expects absolute obedience and will destroy those who do not repent of their sins; and the merciful Jesus, whose arms are stretched out all the day long to all nations. This fits the common cliché contrasting the Old and New Testaments. In the Book of Mormon, the Lord is sometimes depicted as quick to forgive and full of grace, equity, truth, patience, mercy, and long-suffering; yet, he is also angry at the wicked and ready to destroy them. Nephi speaks again and again of the Lord God slaying the wicked and sparing the righteous (e.g., 2 Ne. 30:9–10). Alma repeats this idea, which is an ongoing theme in the book: “[I]f ye will not repent, ye shall be cast off at the last day” (Alma 22:6). Since they both promote the idea of the righteous versus the wicked, it is no surprise that Nephi and Alma are also the two principal prophets who promote the idea that the wicked will be cast down to hell. If God destroys sinners, does this justify good people to likewise subdue the wicked in war?

Within the Book of Mormon, the small books of Jarom and Omni record the cycles of sin, war, and destruction—a pattern prevalent throughout the rest of the book too. One of the many narrators in these two books states that the prophets “threaten the people”: if they transgress and do not repent, they will “be destroyed from off the face of the land” (Jarom 1:10). An angel tells Alma: “[E]xcept they repent the Lord God will destroy them” (Alma 8:16). And the means of destruction in the Book of Mormon are the wars and contentions that kill countless people, as Mormon explains: “But, behold, the judgments of God will overtake the wicked; and it is by the wicked that the wicked are punished; for it is the wicked that stir up the hearts of the children of men unto bloodshed” (Morm. 4:5). Does the fact that God uses the wicked to punish the wicked justify violence, or at least a “just war” against an aggressor? And yet, there are always many innocent people who suffer and die even in just wars, often as collateral damage. Alma says that the blood of the innocent cries from the ground for “vengeance” (Alma 20:18). But how does vengeance relate to justice and just punishments for evildoers? “Vengeance is mine, and I will repay,” saith the Lord in Mormon 3:15. All of this raises the larger issue of God’s justice and the problem of innocent suffering, the oldest and perhaps most difficult religious question.

The problem of theodicy is beyond the scope of this paper, but it still underpins the equation between war and hell and between justice and mercy in the Book of Mormon. I have used the stories of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies, Captain Moroni versus the king-men, and Alma’s treat-

ment of Korihor to forefront the problems inherent in establishing peace, righteousness, liberty, justice, and equality without resorting to force, violence, and warfare against those who dissent, resist, and oppose. At this point, it would be easy to conclude that love is the answer—that we should love our enemies and do good “to those who spitefully use” us (Matt. 5:44). While I want to believe that this admonition from Jesus himself provides the complete answer, the Book of Mormon warns me that there are those who will not be persuaded by love or truth, that there are those who delight in utter destruction. It is easy for me to critique Nephi, Mormon, Captain Moroni, and Alma for the inconsistencies in their approaches to dealing with enemies, but, in fairness, I must admit these men face dilemmas that are not easily solved, including the issue of how to protect the innocent without violence.²³

In his 2010 article, “Violence in the Scriptures: Mormonism and the Cultural Theory of Renè Girard,” Mack C. Stirling promotes Girard’s theory that God never uses violence. He argues that the Christian Gospels are “the ultimate revelation of God’s nonviolence and transcendent love” because Jesus conquered “violence without violence” by submitting himself to death without protest.²⁴ Stirling does not believe there is ever a justification for violence, even in defense of the powerless. And he gives multiple examples from the Book of Mormon to show how even good men use the name of God to justify violence, falling into the inevitable “double bind between Christ’s gospel of love for one’s enemy and the need to use violence to survive.”²⁵ I agree that good people can misuse the name of God to promote their own agendas. But neither Stirling nor Girard demonstrates how Christ conquers violence without violence; nor do they adequately explain how their ideas confront and resolve the problem of evil and God’s justice, which raises the question: How can God be a god of utter nonviolence when he stands by and allows the innocent to be slaughtered? Saying it was not really God who commanded the “sacred

23. Again, whether these prophets are historical or fictional is irrelevant because the text convincingly portrays characters who are grappling with age-old problems illustrated in the world’s great books.

24. Stirling, “Violence in the Scriptures,” 70. Though I have major disagreements with Stirling’s conclusions, his study is very thorough and is filled with many excellent observations and examples.

25. Stirling, 84.

violence” does not solve the problem of a powerful and benevolent God’s inaction or noninvolvement.²⁶

Though Stirling employs some of the same examples I use, he does not deal with the underlying theoretical conflicts and paradoxes that go beyond simply resisting violence for the sake of love, though he does discuss inevitable “double-binds.” Saying that Christ’s way is the way of love does not explain how love answers any of the difficult questions I have raised in this essay. Stirling does not demonstrate how to deal with the probable result of all the violent destroying all of the nonviolent if people like Captain Moroni will not fight against them.²⁷ He does not address the problem of how to stop the kind of aggressive and destructive power of someone who uses free speech to destroy free speech. Freedom includes the freedom to end freedom. Choice includes the choice to end choice.²⁸ This is why there will never be a war to end all wars. There will always be those who claim the freedom to enslave; there will always be those who choose to condemn choice. Wars always pit those promoting agency against those prohibiting it, those who want everyone to share equally in both freedom and power and those who do not. This was the cause of the war in heaven in Mormon sacred texts. It is the cause of wars on earth according to those same texts. Earthly wars appear to be a continuation of the war in heaven. Perhaps for this reason, Jesus made the enigmatic statement: “Think not that I am come to bring peace on the earth; I have come not to send peace, but a sword” (Matt. 10:34–36).

It is significant that the scriptures address the disturbing notion of a “war in heaven.” If God cannot prevent war in heaven, how can He stop it on earth? The Book of Revelation describes how Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But the great serpent was not strong enough, and he was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him (Rev. 12:7–10).

This idea is taken up and expanded in Mormon scriptures (Moses 4:1–4; Abr. 3:26–28; D&C 29:36–39; and D&C 76:25–26), which center

26. The assertion of some theologians that the Mormon God is not all powerful does not deal adequately with the problem of God’s supposed inaction.

27. A future exploration would address the differences among violence, force, and war. Though related, the various connotations could add meaningful distinctions.

28. G. K. Chesterton asserts: “There is a thought that stops thought. That is the only thought that ought to be stopped.” G. K. Chesterton, “The Suicide of Thought,” In *Orthodoxy* (Image Books, 1959), 33.

the battle in heaven on the issue of power and agency. The Lord accepts the plan of the one “like unto God,” who proposes to give humanity their freedom according to the will of the Father, and rejects the plan of the one who says “that one soul shall not be lost” because this would “destroy the agency of man” that God has given them. For this reason, the devil and a third part of heaven were “cast down.” As a result, the devil deceives and blinds men and makes them “captive to his will” (Moses 4:1–4). Notice the language of captivity so familiar to the Book of Mormon.²⁹ Doctrine and Covenants 29 glosses this scripture, adding another layer of complexity: the third who reject God’s plan do so “because of their agency,” which will also eventually lead them to hell. Because of the free agency of humanity, the devil must tempt humans to evil so that they will have agency and know the bitter from the sweet (D&C 29:36–39).³⁰ All of this suggests that the war in heaven continues on earth and that the complexity of war centers around agency. Thus, the various discourses of war in the Book of Mormon are endemic to all war both in heaven and on earth.

WAR IS HELL

What is important here is that we have several dilemmas. How can we stop war when God Himself seems unable to do so because he desires to preserve the agency of all?³¹ How can there be any hope for humans forgiving offenses and stopping the cycle of revenge and war when God seems so ready to cast out the wicked and send them to hell? Is it too easy to support war and revenge when certain Book of Mormon passages justify war if God commands it? How can we balance the prophet Mormon’s admonition not to delight in blood when he also says that God may command it? “Know ye that ye must lay down your weapons of war, and delight no more in the shedding of blood, and take them not again, save it be that God shall command you” (Morm. 7:4).

When I first began this study twenty years ago during the Iraq War, I decided to read the Book of Mormon through quickly in a period of

29. Although the war in heaven is not referenced in the Book of Mormon, other LDS scriptures use the language found there, showing how similar concepts, especially references to hell in the Book of Mormon, relate to the war in heaven.

30. The problems inherent in the need for temptation are also linked to the question of God’s justice.

31. I do not believe that the centrality of agency fully explains why God allows evil to continue and the innocent to suffer. The theodicy question must be linked with atonement theories, but that is a story for another day, as they say.

four days to get an overall sense of the narrative structure of the book for my later detailed analysis.³² My own reaction surprised me: the Book of Mormon is a grim, violent, tragic tale, full of judgment and little hope for human society. Moroni concludes the book by describing the unending cycles of murder, bloodshed, and war. So much fails in the book. Defensive war fails. Self-defense may be justified, but it fails to bring about peace. Pacifism fails. Vengeance fails even more. Christian socialism fails because it does not produce tolerance for difference. The only time there is peace is when everyone is converted to the same religion (after the wicked have all been destroyed by natural disasters). We are brought back to the difficult dilemmas with which I began: Can equality and diversity coexist? Can justice and liberty be reconciled? Is purity really the basis for a free and ethical society?

But one thing is clear with all these thorny questions: war is hell. The Book of Mormon is a tragedy that reveals why war can never end well, why it cannot be used as a means to end all wars.³³ It is an ineffective tool. As in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, all the major players are dead on the stage at the end of the story in the Book of Mormon. No hero conquers in self-righteous triumph. Each character is destroyed by participating in cycles of revenge and pride, sometimes unwillingly. As in Homer's *Iliad*, which ironically idealizes the warrior mentality while demonstrating vividly the absolutely destructive effects of war even on the victorious Greeks, the Book of Mormon depicts noble soldiers who ultimately do not triumph, as reflected by the haunting lament by Moroni, the lone Nephite survivor: "I even remain alone to write the sad tale of the destruction of my people . . . and I have not friends nor whither to go . . . the Lamanites are at war one with another; and the whole face of this land is one continual round of murder and bloodshed; and no one knoweth the end of the war" (Morm. 8:3–8). Tragic and poignant lamentations conclude both the *Iliad* and the Book of Mormon, two epics filled with bloody warfare and grief.

32. This paper is previously unpublished, though I have given versions of it at the Sunstone Symposium, the Society of Mormon Philosophical Theology conference, and private presentations.

33. In my first version of this paper in 2004, I called the Book of Mormon a tragedy, influenced by my background in comparative literature. I see this pattern even more strongly now. It is telling that Salleh and Hemming also label the Book of Mormon as a tragedy in their recent social justice commentaries.

BALANCING CONTRADICTIONS

In my structural and narratological reading of the Book of Mormon, I conclude that the theology of war is hidden in irony and multiple contradictions that reveal a complex vision of sin and repentance, war and peace, justice and mercy, and good and evil. Things are not always what they seem. Ironically, the prophets in the Book of Mormon insist they are talking in plain terms so the people will understand, though Nephi complains that the disbelief and pride of people and their willful ignorance keep them from understanding the “plainness” of his preaching (2 Ne. 32:7; see also Alma 14:2). Yes, some ideas are plain, such as the love of God and calls to repentance, but other ideas are hidden in conflicting ideologies. King Benjamin’s gloss on God sending people to a hell full of fire and anguish suggests the descriptions used by other prophets may be oversimplifications or scare tactics.³⁴ King Benjamin claims it is the sinner’s own guilt that causes him to “shrink from the presence of the Lord” and that this guilt is only “like” an unquenchable fire (Mosiah 2:38).³⁵ How is it possible to reconcile King Benjamin’s explanation with other scriptures that depict a punishing God who sends sinners to hell? If the scriptures are plain and straightforward, when should we read them literally and when metaphorically?

How do we decide what point of view is most important in a book with internal inconsistencies? The narrator Mormon tends to valorize war and the approach of Captain Moroni, but this same redactor includes the testimony of Samuel the Lamanite, who seems to contradict Mormon’s justifications for war. And Mormon admits that it is Christ himself who commands the people to highlight the testimony of Samuel; for when Christ visits the people in America after his mortal ministry in the old world, he chastises them because they excluded the prophecies of Samuel

34. Chapter 14 in the Book of Alma describes how unbelievers decide to destroy believers by burning them in a large fire in order to mock them for their belief that a “lake of fire and brimstone” is prepared for those who do not repent and believe in the one God, while Alma and Amulek are forced to look on. The ironic twist between literal and figurative beliefs in this story makes it one of the most disturbing in the Book of Mormon.

35. This reflects the theology of hell in section 19 of the Doctrine and Covenants. See Brian D. Birch, “Turning the Devils Out of Doors: Mormonism and the Concept of Hell,” In *Hell and Its Afterlife: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, edited by Isabel Moreira and Margaret Toscano (Ashgate, 2010), 153–63, for an analysis of LDS views on hell.

from their records. Not only does this raise the question of what other important episodes or ideas have been left out, it also asks what is so important about Samuel's message. In Helaman 15, Samuel tells the Nephites that the converted Lamanites have always remained more faithful than they are. Moreover, they "have buried their weapons of war" (Hel. 15.9).

Perhaps Samuel's importance suggests there are other interpretations, other ways of seeing that challenge the major Nephite prophets like Alma, Captain Moroni, and Mormon himself. Perhaps the converted Lamanites are the model after all for rejecting war and establishing peace. In Helaman 5:51, the brothers Nephi and Lehi preach to the Lamanites and convert them, with the result that "as many as were convinced did lay down their weapons of war, and also their hatred and the traditions of their fathers." In Helaman 6, the Lamanites have become the more righteous group, who then preach the gospel to the Nephites. It is not just the Anti-Nephi-Lehies who are praised for refusing to take up arms; all of the Lamanites who convert are depicted as the most righteous for this reason. Perhaps their examples show a better way in contrast to the defensive wars that lead to the cycle of revenge.

The story of the missionary journeys of the sons of Mosiah is a central text in the Book of Mormon, both structurally and thematically. In that account, suddenly the Lamanites have faces. When Ammon is chastised by his brother Aaron for boasting about their missionary success, he says that the credit belongs to God. Moreover, "we came into the wilderness not with the intent to destroy our brethren, but with the intent that perhaps we might save some few of their souls" (Alma 26:26). Ammon says of the Anti-Nephi Lehies:

[W]e can witness of their sincerity, because of their love towards their brethren and also towards us . . . they had rather sacrifice their lives than even to take the life of their enemy . . . because of their love towards their brethren. And now behold I say unto you, has there been so great love in all the land? Behold, I say unto you, Nay, there has not, even among the Nephites. (Alma 26:31–33)

Ammon concludes: "Now my brethren, we see that God is mindful of every people, whatsoever land they may be in; yea, he numbereth his people, and his bowels of mercy are over all the earth" (Alma 26:37).³⁶

36. And yet, Ammon uses violence against the bandits who attack King Lamoni's flocks by cutting off their arms so they cannot attack. The story is both troubling and ironic, given the fact that Ammon later argues for giving up the weapons of war.

GOD IS MINDFUL OF ALL: THE INDIVIDUAL VS. THE COLLECTIVE

One of the contradictions of the Book of Mormon is its promotion of the very destructive nineteenth-century American stereotype of the “Indians,” the indigenous Americans, as wild, dark-skinned savages who are idle and uncivilized. And yet, at the same time these Lamanites are finally the ones who are most prone to give up the ways of war once they are converted to Christ. So, who is the most “civilized” in the end? Who is the most righteous? The structure of the Book of Mormon, with its competing narratives, asks us to rethink our basic suppositions about what it means to be righteous. It asks us to look at what finally ends war. The answer is clear: what puts an end to violence is an inner transformation of the heart, as occurred with the Lamanites. The best missionary efforts in the Book of Mormon are those of King Benjamin and Ammon and Aaron: all show love and put themselves on the same level as those to whom they preach, rather than seeing themselves as morally superior.

But it should also be observed that conversion is not a group phenomenon, though mass violence is. The Lamanites are never all converted, nor are the Nephites, except after all the “wicked” are destroyed before Christ visits the New World. But this kind of destruction cannot be the model for establishing peace and ending war. Conversion in the Book of Mormon is not collective or objective; it is subjective and personal. It is a personal transformation of spirit, mind, and body that centers on individuals, brought about by the love of God, and the love of neighbor. Even in the case of King Benjamin’s people, the account of their conversions focuses on individual responses, though it is widespread. And conversion is not passed on to the next generation; it must be renewed individually.

Though it is a common truism that “love conquers all,” this is not only simplistic but an inadequate response to situations where a powerful group seeks to end the freedom and choice of others. In such situations, force and warfare may be necessary to stop the violence of some against those who choose different paths. Chapter 14 in the Book of Alma, footnoted above, illustrates such a situation. In what appears to be mere meanness of spirit, unbelievers decide to destroy believers by burning them in a large fire to mock them for their belief in an afterlife where sinners are punished in a “lake of fire and brimstone.”

CONCLUSIONS:

This paper represents a transformation of my own beliefs about war and peace in the Book of Mormon. When I started this essay decades ago, I wanted to show that all the statements in the Book of Mormon justifying war do not hold up against passages denouncing war. But the more closely I examined the complex text, the clearer it became that a simple call for peace and love is not enough. My study became a meditative exercise for learning to listen to all voices and for being willing to change my mind to understand all sides of any issue, from the inside out and the outside in.

Alma says that the word of God had a “great tendency to lead the people to do that which was just . . . it had had more powerful effect upon the minds of the people than the sword, or anything else” (Alma 31:5). It is crucial to see that the most important message about war in the Book of Mormon does not belong to Mormon but to his son Moroni, who concludes the tragic history of his people with a message about the gift of charity and the love of God. Moroni ends the book with advice about the gifts of the Spirit, with a discourse on the importance of faith, hope, and charity as the greatest miracles of all.³⁷ Love and peace are miracles because they come only as a gift of God through inner transformation of the heart. Though we cannot force anyone to accept God’s love or act on it, we can continue with hope that some may listen, even in a war-torn world. This is the book’s final word about a theology of war in the Book of Mormon. War is inevitable; and it always fails, even when waged to promote peace. Only the love of God can help us see the world anew, making us capable of turning swords of war into plowshares of peace.

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37. The fact that Moroni is repeating and expanding his father’s sermon in Moroni 7 shows us another side of Mormon himself.



Deliberation, Strategy, and Tribalism in Mormon Political Identity

by Kenneth R. Pike

INTRODUCTION

The question I will explore is not simple, but it is straightforward: whether and to what extent “Mormon” constitutes, or should constitute, a political identity. To be a “political identity,” on my view, requires a personal identity to encompass (along with whatever else it encompasses) a political philosophy—or in other words, to suggest¹ some view on permissible versus impermissible government arrangements and activities. In exploring the question of Mormon political identity, it is not my goal to provide either a strictly emic or strictly etic account,² or to make any prescription on the matter. Rather, I hope to clarify not just what it is to be (politically?) Mormon, but also perhaps the value or purpose in having any religious (or other) identity.

1. “Suggest” rather than “entail” because, when speaking of personal identity, we speak inevitably of generalizations that admit a host of individual exceptions. It is not the exceptions with which this essay is primarily concerned, but with the generalizations.

2. Kenneth L. Pike, “Etic and Emic Standpoints for the Description of Behavior,” in *Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structure of Human Behavior* (Mouton & Co., 1967), 37–72.

1. IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN POLITICS

A “personal identity,” whatever else it is, is a category to which we regard ourselves or others as belonging. Humans can be categorized in many ways. Some common approaches to identity attribution look to ancestry, appearance, and activity (including intellectual activity). Identity attributions are sometimes regarded as an injustice—Sally Haslanger suggests that “when justice is achieved, there will no longer be white women (there will no longer be men or women, whites or members of any other race).”³ Her argument, to the best of my understanding, is not that humans are evolving toward a sexless, phenotypically uniform species, but that we lack morally legitimate reasons for categorizing ourselves or others using extant conceptions of race or gender. Her approach to social kinds invites us to undertake “genealogical” and “ameliorative” examination of identity concepts in search of a normatively legitimate purpose for personal identity attributions. This involves an examination of both the way concepts of social identity came to be as we regard them, and the present use and function of those concepts. The goal, on Haslanger’s view, is to “focus less on our intuitions and more on the role of concepts in structuring our social lives.”⁴

There are many ways for identity concepts to structure our lives, but my focus here is the way arguably apolitical *religious* identities (personal identities that encompass commitments to religious doctrine and practice) come to function as *political* identities. If I introduce myself as a fan of science fiction, board games, and the musical stylings of “Weird Al” Yankovic, I’ve categorized myself in three pretty distinct ways. If you accept these categorizations (and why wouldn’t you?), depending on your grasp of popular culture you might then make some surprisingly accurate guesses about *other* identities it would be plausible to attribute to me (in this case, probably “geek” or “nerd”). Most likely, though, my political philosophy would not be among them. By contrast, if I claim to be a centrist, or a communist, or a classical liberal, this will communicate at least some information concerning my political philosophy, insofar as those are words we use to categorize people’s intellectual activity in just that way. But what if I tell you that I am a college professor, or a coal miner,

3. Sally Haslanger, “What Are We Talking About? The Semantics and Politics of Social Kinds,” in *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 366.

4. Haslanger, 379.

or a Mormon? This isn't *quite* so definitive as saying I'm a liberal, insofar as there are presumably *some* conservative college professors and *some* communist coal miners. But if you have even a rudimentary grasp of the demographic landscape of twenty-first century American politics, you can infer with better-than-chance odds the political leanings of coal miners, college professors, and Mormons alike.

I suspect this is in part because the dominant approach to political identity in Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) societies⁵ is to identify, establish, and maintain reliable voting blocs. This is most visibly a question of partisan affiliation; for example, a "Republican" in contemporary American politics is ideally someone who more-or-less endorses the political philosophy promulgated by the Republican National Committee, and so tends to vote for Republican candidates and initiatives in furtherance of that philosophy. But party affiliation, especially in large political systems with few political parties, identifies coalitions of interests better than it tracks individual beliefs concerning permissible government arrangements or activities.⁶ Party platforms tend to minimize coherent political philosophy, instead predominantly enumerating specific policy goals—not all of which are necessarily compatible in theory or practice. The advancement of these policy goals requires the coalition to function in concert, giving rise to a variety of difficulties.

In the United States today, one of the most extensively studied political identity associations is between identifying as Black and voting for Democrats. While not every voter who self-identifies as Black is politically supportive of the candidates and initiatives of the Democratic National Committee, more than 80 percent generally are.⁷ There are many reasons why someone who identifies as Black might vote for Democrat

5. This terminology is owed to Joseph Henrich, Steven J. Heine, and Ara Norenzayan, "The Weirdest People in the World?" *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 33 (2010): 61–83.

6. This may be less obviously true than it was in the past; there is some evidence that increased political polarization tightens the relationship between partisan affiliation and ideological commitments. Delia Baldisari and Andrew Gelman, "Partisans Without Constraint: Political Polarization and Trends in American Public Opinion," *American Journal of Sociology* 114, no. 2 (2008): 408–46. Even so, infighting between ideological factions within major political parties does still occur.

7. Carroll Doherty and Jocelyn Kiley, "Democratic Edge in Party Identification Narrows Slightly," *Pew Research Center*, June 2, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2020/06/02/democratic-edge-in-party-identification-narrows-slightly/>.

candidates, but most such reasons will have no special connection to race. A Black voter may, for example, regard candidate Joseph Biden's promise to prevent fracking on federal lands as a decisive reason to vote for him—but so might any other voter who finds fracking objectionable. Do Black Americans, *by virtue of their racial identity*, have any reason to align themselves with the Democratic National Committee? One might be that they think it is in their individual and/or collective interest to do so. History offers some evidence in support of this account: after the first Republican president of the United States emancipated Confederate slaves, Black Americans overwhelmingly supported Republican politicians and policies for decades. But support for Republicans was weakened by the New Deal, and in the second half of the twentieth century Republicans opposed government programs intended to specifically benefit Black Americans—including “affirmative action” initiatives initially spearheaded by Black Republican Arthur Fletcher.⁸ Today, Black voters overwhelmingly support Democrats, who took up those initiatives and sought to expand them.

Recent work by Ismail K. White and Chryl N. Laird suggests another reason why Black Americans align themselves with the Democratic National Committee. On White and Laird's view, a sense of political *unity* was forged by the collective experiences of slavery and segregation, generating tremendous pressure to prioritize ingroup issues.⁹ White and Laird suggest that even though “a quarter of black Democrats identify as conservative, and 43 percent identify as moderate . . . [s]ocial pressure . . . cements [the] relationship between the black electorate and the Democratic party.”¹⁰ In other words, many Black voters support Democrat candidates and initiatives primarily because other Black voters do. Notably, while ingroup conformity along such lines might sometimes be explained by appeal to individual self-interest, often this does not appear to be true. For example, low-income Republicans are sometimes accused of voting *against* their

8. David Hamilton Golland, *A Terrible Thing to Waste: Arthur Fletcher and the Conundrum of the Black Republican* (University Press of Kansas, 2019).

9. Ismail K. White and Chryl N. Laird, *Steadfast Democrats: How Social Forces Shape Black Political Behavior* (Princeton University Press, 2020).

10. Chryl Laird and Ismail White, “Why So Many Black Voters Are Democrats, Even When They Aren't Liberal,” *FiveThirtyEight*, February 26, 2020, <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/why-so-many-black-voters-are-democrats-even-when-they-arent-liberal/>.

own interests when they oppose new or expanded social programs.¹¹ Despite frequent overlap, then, strategic self-interest and group conformity function as distinct explanations for political participation.

These three approaches to political participation—deliberating toward reasoned conclusions, pursuing personal self-interest, and participating in group conformity—are neither wholly discrete nor likely exhaustive of the possibilities. But they correlate with recognizable trends in political identity. Call the reflective participant “deliberative,” the self-interested participant “strategic,” and the conformist participant “tribal.” These approaches to political participation are not afforded equal respect on the WEIRD worldview, which seems to frame deliberative voters as praiseworthy, strategic voters as relatable (if sometimes objectionably selfish), and tribal voters as blameworthy.

It would be unsurprising for the values of a putatively apolitical identity to develop *into* a political identity through reflection on any values encompassed by that identity. A theology espousing the “divine right of kings,” for example, would naturally develop followers prepared to incorporate monarchism into their political philosophy. What White and Laird’s scholarship on race shows us is that putatively apolitical identities can *also* take on political significance, by way of strategy and tribalism. Can these approaches to participation constitute a *political philosophy*? It seems to me that a strategic perspective like “proper governance means improving life for me and people like me” does constitute a political theory, albeit an especially thin one. Many varieties of “ethno-nationalism,” for example, appear to fit this description. At the *tribal* level, though, political philosophy becomes essentially parasitic—explicit or implicit appeal to the idea that “proper governance is whatever my people say it is” presumes that at least *some* of “my people” (community leaders, for example) are *saying* something, which suggests they have a deliberative or strategic political identity to which tribal participants can conform. The cooperation of tribal participants is likely essential to the success of either deliberative or strategic political projects—in democratic societies certainly, and probably in others—so I am reluctant to deny that tribal participants lack a political identity altogether. Rather, tribal commitment should be regarded as a sort of “minimum viable political identity” (MVPI). I’ve here borrowed the language of business: in product development, “minimum

11. Nigel Barber, “Why Do Some Poor People Vote Against Their Interests?” *Psychology Today*, March 14, 2019, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-human-beast/201903/why-do-some-poor-people-vote-against-their-interests>.

viable product” refers to a product that is sufficiently developed for basic use, but underdeveloped in ways that permit user feedback to guide development toward final completion.¹² MVPI doesn’t capture a specific view on permissible government practice, but it does encompass the recognition of one’s place in a political collective. With MVPI, individuals are positioned to *potentially* ask normative questions concerning their political participation, perhaps eventually graduating to a more strategic or even deliberative approach.

The idea of growth beyond MVPI highlights the phenomenon that paths *to* political identity are also paths *between* identities. In much the way that political parties tend to be coalitions of not-always-aligned interests, individuals embody many personal identities (some inherently political, some not) and often find themselves prioritizing some above others.¹³ One surprising, but perhaps not *very* surprising, trend in American politics is that individuals not only tend to adopt the political identity of others with similar racial, religious, or ethnic identities, but that people also tend to adopt the racial, religious, or ethnic identity of others with similar political identities.¹⁴ There is nothing in principle preventing individuals from identifying as a particular race or religion on the basis of strategy or conformity rather than reflection on facts or values, and identity categories themselves can be changed over time by the traffic moving *between* them. Many such cases are politically controversial—even *discussing* such cases can be controversial.¹⁵ This kind of breakdown between the ways we

12. Frank Robinson, “Minimum Viable Product,” SyncDev, 2001, <https://web.archive.org/web/20160525101214/http://www.syncdev.com:80/minimum-viable-product/>.

13. This idea is at the heart of “intersectionality” scholarship, which explores oppression as a disadvantage occurring along multiple category axes. Kimberle Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Policies,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, no. 1: 139–67. As the focus of this essay is not oppression *per se*, but simply the reasons individuals may have to make (or reject) political and/or religious identity attributions, I would place it conceptually upstream, so to speak, from intersectionality literature.

14. Patrick J. Egan, “Identity as Dependent Variable: How Americans Shift Their Identities to Align With Their Politics,” *American Journal of Political Science* 64, no. 3 (2020): 699–716.

15. For example, Rebecca Tuvel’s philosophical exploration of “transracialism” created a significant stir in academic philosophy. Justin Weinberg, “Philosopher’s

categorize ourselves and the ways others categorize us underwrites a great many twenty-first-century political disputes.

2. WHAT'S A "MORMON"?

So it is with "Mormon," though this might not be obvious at first glance. As a religious identity, Mormonism *prima facie* encompasses a set of religious commitments—doctrines and practices derived from scriptural canon and organizational administration. Any number of these might suggest plausible political implications to the reflective adherent, but likely implications do not always align with one another—or with the attitudes of self-identified Mormons. Even more confusingly, "Mormon" has on occasion been regarded by some as a *race*¹⁶ or, more recently, as an *ethnicity*.¹⁷ This is especially interesting given the number of political philosophies lately accused of being *religions*¹⁸—an approach to political criticism going back at least as far as the French Revolution,¹⁹ but circulating with renewed vigor over the past few decades. What can it mean for "Mormon" to be an ethnicity—or, for that matter, for a political identity to be a religion? One way to address the question might be a top-down approach, descriptively or prescriptively laying out the meaning of "religion" and "race" and "ethnicity" before testing specific cases against those meanings. I will not take that approach here, preferring to focus instead on the particulars of the concept "Mormon." Following Haslanger's admonition to elucidate purpose in advance of categorization, I ask: Can we arrive at a better sense of "Mormon" through genealogical and/or ameliorative analysis?

A complete genealogy of the concept "Mormon" would require volumes, but presumably begins with the title of the Book of Mormon, a religious work published by Joseph Smith the same year (1830) he established

Article on Transracialism Sparks Controversy," *DailyNous*, May 1, 2017, <https://dailynous.com/2017/05/01/philosophers-article-transracialism-sparks-controversy/>.

16. W. Paul Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color: Race and the Mormon Struggle for Whiteness* (Oxford University Press, 2015).

17. Mette Ivie Harrison, "What is an Ethnic Mormon?" *Huffington Post*, December 1, 2015, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/what-is-an-ethnic-mormon_b_8682820.

18. Susan Jacoby, "Stop Calling Politics Our New Religion," *New York Times*, July 4, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/04/opinion/sunday/politics-new-religion.html>.

19. Philippe Burrin, "Political Religion: The Relevance of a Concept," *History and Memory* 9, no. 1/2 (1997): 321–49.

the Church of Christ. The church was renamed on several occasions, and underwent several schisms, over the following century. It is unclear who first applied the category “Mormon” to the group, or whether it was applied with benign or malicious intent, but by the time of Smith’s death in 1844 his followers had adopted “Mormonism” as a canonical reference to their own religious identity.²⁰ Adherents had by then been subjected to significant oppression, including an executive order from Governor Lilburn Boggs declaring that “Mormons must be treated as enemies, and must be exterminated or driven from the state.”²¹ Politics had a significant role to play, as government officials in Missouri feared the consequences of a Mormon voting bloc:

The early Church and its adherents were by no means committed to radical abolitionism—the Church, in fact, had no official policy on slavery when the Mormons first arrived in Missouri—but the Missourians’ concerns regarding the Mormons’ racial politics were not unreasonable. The Mormons were generally “free-soilers” opposed to slavery, and as their numbers rapidly grew, so, too, did the Church’s political sway.²²

This suggests at least two interesting genealogical ideas. From an etic perspective—the perspective of someone external to the identity under discussion—Mormon identity attributions were politically freighted from very early in the history of the faith. As a direct result, the emic perspective—the perspective of someone *internal* to the faith—was shaped from its inception by shared experiences of persecution. Since that time, the largest and most famous sect of Smith’s followers, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), has periodically waffled between actively promoting the category “Mormon,” and rejecting it. In 2018, for example, the world-famous Mormon Tabernacle Choir was renamed the Tabernacle Choir at Temple Square to remove the word “Mormon”²³—

20. In reference to the murder of Joseph Smith, John Taylor wrote that the “*innocent blood* on the floor of Carthage jail is a broad seal affixed to ‘Mormonism’ that cannot be rejected by any court on earth.” This language appears in LDS canon at Doctrine & Covenants 135:7.

21. Missouri Executive Order no. 44 (October 27, 1838).

22. T. Ward Frampton, “‘Some Savage Tribe’: Race, Legal Violence, and the Mormon War of 1838,” *Journal of Mormon History* 40, no. 1 (2014): 182.

23. Jason Swensen, “Here is the Mormon Tabernacle Choir’s New Name and Why They Changed It,” *Church News*, October 5, 2018, <https://www.thechurchnews.com/leaders-and-ministry/2018-10-05/here-is-the-mormon-tabernacle-choirs-new-name-and-why-they-changed-it-7934>.

just eight years after the Church launched its extensive “I’m a Mormon” advertising campaign embracing the moniker. Today, people outside the Church seem largely content to attribute Mormon identity to anyone who regards the Book of Mormon as canonical scripture, including extant polygamous sects (the Church renounced polygamy in 1890). Politically, Mormons are widely regarded as conservative, and as of 2014, about 70 percent of self-identified Mormons in the United States also identified as Republican or Republican-leaning in their politics.²⁴

The ameliorative question, in a nutshell, is: How *should* we understand “Mormon,” and—normatively—why? What is the *point* of having the concept at all? Etically, individuals can use the concept to facilitate social interactions. Specific cases might be trivial, like avoiding the embarrassment of making a gift of expensive wine to a family of teetotalers, but small interactions accumulate: “Mormon” can also function as a useful demographic category. This is not only true for scholars of anthropology but for political strategists, at least so long as Mormons act in reliably homogenous ways. For a non-Mormon to possess the concept “Mormon” seems to be bear utility, provided the concept’s content is reasonably veridical. It is a useful concept for understanding (and possibly benefiting from) humans within that category. But it may also be a useful category for working mischief against Mormons.

Emically—from “inside” the Mormon identity—someone who identifies or is identified as Mormon faces a shifting sea of costs and benefits. On the negative, being identified as Mormon can make one a target of prejudiced assumptions and bigoted mistreatment. While the United States has mostly²⁵ abandoned the kind of targeted government persecution of Mormons that characterized the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, systemic prejudices clearly persist. To furnish just one simple but professionally relevant example, nearly one third of academic philosophers surveyed in the first decade of the twenty-first century expressed unwillingness to hire Mormons as college or university faculty.²⁶ Category costs may

24. “Party Affiliation Among Mormons,” *Pew Research Center*, <https://web.archive.org/web/20220411043627/https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/religious-landscape-study/religious-tradition/mormon/party-affiliation/>.

25. Insofar as polygamous Mormon sects remain extant, my suspicion is that there are at least some Mormons who still regard themselves as enduring religious persecution from government officials.

26. Justin Weinberg, “Who Are Philosophers Less Willing to Hire,” *DailyNous*, April 10, 2018, <https://dailynous.com/2018/04/10/philosophers-less-willing-hire/>.

also be imposed on Mormons by other Mormons. The doctrines and practices associated with one's religious identity create opportunities to worry whether one is *insufficiently* or *excessively* devout—or to accuse others of being so. Policing the boundaries of the category can also be a way of policing thought and action, demanding agreement or consent from others in exchange for validating their own self-conception. And some who seek disaffiliation with Mormonism find that, insofar as the past is not optional, “former Mormon” is still a *kind* of Mormon, a difficult-to-escape categorization that comes bundled with its own identity conundrums.

The benefits of Mormon identity are more frequently touted, at least by adherents and community leaders. Mormons are sometimes the targets of benevolent prejudice, enjoying some reputation for kindness, generosity, trustworthiness, and other virtues. Mormon identity can bring with it a sense of community and belonging; it can connect strangers and function as common ground in relationships with family, friends, and romantic partners. Individuals might heuristically rely on their Mormon identity for all manner of behavioral guidance, conforming to adaptive expectations in situations where it would be too costly or difficult to rely on careful deliberation. In game theoretic terms, cultivating a sense of Mormon identity is effective at coordinating cooperation for the benefit of individuals and the group.

For the religiously Mormon, though, all of this is supposed to be beside the point. Costs and benefits are *accidental* to the revelatory process of spiritual conversion (and subsequent affiliation with church organization, most often—but not necessarily—LDS). These accidents may be acknowledged as “trials” or “blessings,” but they are not ordinarily recognized as decisive reasons to identify, or not identify, as Mormon in the first place. Religious participation in the tradition is not supposed to be from conformity or self-interest, but from spiritual reflection and, ultimately, personal revelation from God. While it would be unrealistic, I think, to suggest that affiliation *always* happens this way, the role of free choice and personal revelation in religious conversion is a recurrent theme in Mormon religious narratives.²⁷ The analogy to the WEIRD privileging of deliberative versus strategic or tribal approaches to political iden-

27. Consider, for example, Brigham Young's assertion that “intelligence, to a certain extent, was bestowed both upon Saint and sinner, to use independently, aside from whether they have the law of the Priesthood or not, whether they have ever heard of it or not.” Brigham Young, December 3, 1854, *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (LDS Booksellers Depot, 1854–86): 139.

tity should not be overlooked! For those outside Mormonism, it doesn't especially *matter* whether Mormons ultimately constitute a "religion" or "race" or "ethnicity"—the category has some use, whether for beneficent or maleficent aims, and whether individual members are acting from congenital, traditional, or sectarian motivations is rarely salient. From *inside* Mormonism, to attribute or assume Mormon identity based on tradition or ingroup conformity, rather than a deliberative process of spiritual conversion, is to employ a concept of Mormonism that contradicts one of the sect's central teachings.

This may help to explain the Church's on-again, off-again relationship with the category "Mormon." Mormonism, like other human identities, comes with an inclination toward ingroup conformity. But that conformity is *supposed* to be grounded in spiritual deliberation: the keeping of one's covenants in pursuit of one's personal exaltation, with the guidance of direct personal revelation. Conformity to Mormonism from solidarity (tribalism) or the good of Mormons generally (strategy) are not ordinary features of Mormon identity or religious practice—at least not among the mainstream, globalized Church. Rejection of the category "Mormon" (as per current Church guidance) might be understood as an attempt to emphasize the individual, and the individual's standing with God and Jesus Christ, over mere adherence to community norms. It might also be understood as an attempt to make participation in the Church more attractive to members and potential converts who do not fit other genealogically grounded facets of Mormon identity, like being a descendant of Mormon pioneers, living in Utah, having many children—or voting Republican.

3. THREE DEGREES OF POLITICAL MORMONISM

Why, then, *do* American Mormons today mostly vote Republican, almost as reliably as Black Americans vote Democrat? At the level of the individual, answers will presumably vary: as with any large identity category, presumably some Mormons deliberate on their theology, while others strategize, or conform, or try to separate their religion and politics entirely. The more those answers vary, the less sense it makes to talk about "Mormon" as a political, rather than strictly religious, category. This raises a substantially empirical question on which data is limited. But within Mormonism there is an interesting, perhaps even unique phenomenon warranting philosophical attention. Along *each* of the paths in my taxonomy between apolitical and political identity, the doctrines and practices of religious Mormonism raise noticeable hurdles. While these hurdles are

not insurmountable, their very existence seems noteworthy, at least within a twenty-first-century political milieu where identitarian arguments frequently dominate political discourse.

Consider some of the deliberative political questions that might be raised by Mormon doctrine and practice. Is the United Order an endorsement of communism? Does the war in heaven teach the divine centrality of libertarianism? Does the Book of Mormon endorse democracy and condemn monarchy? A deliberative political identity need not furnish a robust answer to *all* questions of permissible governance. Many of the doctrines and practices of the Church do, at least arguably, suggest answers to political questions. Presumably, Mormons can meditate on the doctrines and practices of their religion and draw political conclusions therefrom. The Church has occasionally released statements along these very lines.²⁸ And yet there are both practical and theoretical ways that religious Mormonism disrupts the development of deliberative Mormon political identity.

In practice, partisan political disagreements persist at the very highest levels of Mormon community leadership,²⁹ and the Church is explicitly committed to political neutrality.³⁰ Granted, political disagreements happen even within explicitly political identity groups, like political parties,

28. Perhaps most famously, the leadership of the Church in 1936 wrote, “[N]o faithful Church member can be a Communist. We call upon all Church members completely to eschew Communism.” Heber J. Grant, J. Reuben Clark Jr., and David O. McKay, “Warning to Church Members,” *Deseret News*, July 3, 1936. This oft-quoted letter acknowledges the surface resemblance between communism and the LDS “United Order,” and explains that the admonition is the result of extant communist regimes interfering with family relationships and religious worship in ways incompatible with Mormonism. The admonition’s preamble also asserts that the Church “does not interfere, and has no intention of trying to interfere, with the fullest and freest exercise of the political franchise of its members.”

29. D. Michael Quinn, “Ezra Taft Benson and Mormon Political Conflicts,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 26, no. 2 (1993): 1–87.

30. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “Political Neutrality and Participation,” updated June 1, 2023, <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/official-statement/political-neutrality>. See also Articles of Faith 1:12 (“We believe in being subject to kings, presidents, rulers and magistrates”). While it is not impossible for a political philosophy to conclude that both hereditary monarchies and representative democracies are permissible forms of government, it is difficult to imagine how a political philosophy genuinely agnostic toward both monarchy

and the Church's political neutrality is arguably imposed, at least in part, by the terms of its legal status as a 501(c)(3) tax exempt corporation.³¹ But to whatever extent "Mormon" might function as a deliberative political identity, it must do so in the *absence* of Church leadership and policy promoting that end. This would be a relatively minor point if, independent of Church leadership and policy, Mormon doctrine clearly suggested some view on permissible government arrangements and activities. After all, the deliberative path to political identity concerns ideological commitments, not conformity to guidance from leadership. But Mormonism *additionally* lacks a theology from which consistent political conclusions might reasonably be drawn. As James E. Faulconer observes, Mormons "are without an official or even semi-official philosophy that explains and gives rational support to their beliefs and teachings."³² The problem is not that Mormons cannot deliberate on their religious commitments to reach political conclusions; clearly, Mormons can, and do. Rather, Mormon religious commitment is defeasible even at the level of doctrine, because the exercise of priesthood authority under the leadership of a living prophet is an overriding principle of Mormon religious identity. In theory—even if almost never in practice—this subjects personal political deliberations to authoritative veto through continuing revelation.³³ In extreme cases, religious Mormons might face expulsion from the Church community as a result of their political commitments, *even if those commitments are grounded in deliberation on theology*.³⁴ Conforming one's politics to the dictates of a

and democracy could assert much difference between, e.g., Republicans and Democrats in the United States of America.

31. 26 U.S.C. § 501(c)(3).

32. James E. 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," *Element: A Journal of Mormon Philosophy and Theology* 2, no. 2 (2006): 21.

33. As Allen D. Haynie recently put it, "[U]nlike vintage comic books and classic cars, prophetic teachings do not become more valuable with age. That is why we should not seek to use the words of past prophets to dismiss the teachings of living prophets." Allen D. Haynie, "A Living Prophet for the Latter Days," April 2023, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2023/04/16haynie?lang=eng>.

34. Likely the best-known example is Helmuth Hübener, who was excommunicated for activities in opposition to the Nazi government of Germany. Richard Loyd Dewey and Blair R. Holmes, *Hubener vs. Hitler: A Biography of Helmuth Hubener, Mormon Teenage Resistance Leader* (Paramount Books, 2004). Hübener's particular circumstances, including his posthumous reinstatement

community leader is *not* deliberative, but tribal.³⁵ Even if Mormon theology is more substantive than Faulconer's account suggests, at minimum the doctrines of continuing revelation and hierarchical priesthood authority serve to destabilize Mormonism as a deliberative political identity.³⁶

None of this strictly *prevents* a religious Mormon from reasonably concluding, even correctly, that some specific act or political actor is incompatible with the doctrines and practices of Mormonism. For example, among the most clearly articulated of Mormon beliefs is the idea that "we claim the privilege of worshiping Almighty God according to the dictates of our own conscience, and allow all men the same privilege, let them worship how, where, or what they may" (A of F 1:11). Deliberatively, one reason American Mormons might favor Republicans could be a perception that Democrats oppose free exercise in some way, or that Republicans are more apt to defend it. As we have seen, there are both genealogical and ameliorative reasons for Mormons to be especially sensitive to violations of free exercise. Perhaps the shared experience of religious oppression is what "clears the hurdle," so to speak. But if so, the same reasoning may not apply equally well to deliberation on other issues with less genealogical relevance to Mormon identity.

Mormon political commitment to free exercise also seems relevant to the development of a *strategic* political identity. Anyone with a Mormon identity has strategic reason to think it impermissible for government actors to interfere with their religious practice. But presumably people of all faiths think, at minimum, that their government should not prevent their own worship. It seems obvious enough that Mormonism *could* func-

as a member of the Church, are historically unusual, but do illustrate one way that religious Mormonism has operated against the formation of a categorically Mormon political identity.

35. What if someone deliberately arrives at the conclusion that they ought to behave in strategic or tribal ways? I think this is possible, potentially common, and even plausibly wise. After all, my proposed taxonomy is not intended to identify perfectly discrete approaches to political identity, so a tribal voter might also be *genealogically* deliberative. In most contexts, however, this seems likely to serve as a distinction without a difference.

36. It could be suggested that many individuals have diverse, minimally overlapping Mormon political identities as a result of deliberation on their religious commitments. This might be right, but then "Mormon" would not be one political category; it would be many. Not only would this be confusing, it may also be one small reason to reject, as far as possible, the application of categories to individuals. I revisit this thought at the end of this section.

tion as a strategic political identity, not least because all personal identities *can* so function—though many do not. Many personal identities don't seem to encompass sufficiently important or sufficiently infringed-upon interests to inspire the political position that proper governance means—whatever else it means—"improving life for me and others with this identity." But some personal identities *do*, and political advocacy organizations dedicated to advancing the interests of a particular identity group are too numerous to list. Most frame their mission as defending their ingroup against defamation, discrimination, and other maltreatment. So it is interesting that, despite historic and contemporary maltreatment of Mormons and the shared history and experience of Mormon oppression, there really is no Mormon political advocacy organization analogous to the Anti-Defamation League, Catholic League, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, or similar.³⁷

Does the Church crowd out such organizations by filling the strategic political advocacy niche itself? The Church *is* politically involved, at minimum, with efforts to secure and defend proselyting opportunities and other religious freedoms around the world. Its efforts are not, however, centered on directly benefiting ingroup members—that is, the Church's goal does not appear to be "improving life for Mormons specifically" beyond pursuing and maintaining legal and social environments where the practice of Mormonism, including proselytizing, is possible. A legal and social environment of religious toleration does not *uniquely* benefit Mormons. It might still ground a strategic Mormon political identity, insofar as Mormon religious identity suggests a political endorsement of free religious exercise.³⁸ But to this extent "political Mormon" would not be

37. There have been some *attempts* to create such an organization, but none remain active for more than a handful of years. Michael de Groote, "Mormon Defense League Launched," *Deseret News*, August 4, 2011, <https://www.deseret.com/2011/8/4/20207691/mormon-defense-league-launched>. The Mormon Defense League website is no longer active, and their Facebook page redirected to "Mormon Voices" by November 2011. The Mormon Voices website is also no longer active, and the Mormon Voices Facebook page has not made any updates since February 2015.

38. While religious people and organizations will often advocate for "free" exercise when they are specifically denied it, most have historically denied free exercise to other faiths when possible. As of 2017, scarcely half the nations of the world were officially "neutral" toward religious exercise, in the sense of neither endorsing nor condemning any particular faith. "Many Countries Favor Specific Religions, Officially or Unofficially," *Pew Research Center*, October 3, 2017, <https://www.pewresearch.org/2017/10/03/many-countries-favor-specific-religions-officially-or-unofficially/>.

distinct from “political Christian” or “political Jew” or any other religiously grounded political identity suggesting an endorsement of free exercise.

Something similar can be said of Mormon political tribalism. Unsurprisingly, there is empirical evidence that Mormon political participation is frequently tribal.³⁹ In Utah, where about 60 percent of the population is LDS, the legislature seated in 2021 was 86 percent LDS, only one of the eighty-one Republicans seated was not LDS, and just nine of the twenty-two Democrats seated were LDS.⁴⁰ This contrasts starkly with the picture of a politically diverse or even basically apolitical Mormon experience painted by Church productions in recent years.⁴¹ It is also the kind of information that tends to accompany “separation of church and state” complaints regarding Mormon influence in Utah politics. However else Mormon political identity may manifest, the fact that many people identify *as Mormon* seems sufficient to generate an (at least occasionally) influential MVPI. But, crucially, *Mormons do not appear to be special in this regard*. That is, criticizing tribalism is an attack of opportunity that generally applies to the critic as well as the criticized. Political actors are unlikely to complain when tribalism works in their favor—only when it works against them.

pewresearch.org/religion/2017/10/03/many-countries-favor-specific-religions-officially-or-unofficially/. So while “free exercise” is not a uniquely Mormon political value, it is also, perhaps surprisingly, not a value that is common to all religiously grounded political identities. Whether it would be central to a possible-world, twenty-first-century Mormonism where the theocratic nation of Deseret avoided absorption into the United States of America, is an interesting question but beyond the present scope.

39. David E. Campbell and J. Quin Monson, “Following the Leader? Mormon Voting on Ballot Propositions,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 42, no. 4 (2003): 605–19.

40. Lee Davidson, “Latter-day Saints Are Overrepresented in Utah’s Legislature, Holding 9 of Every 10 Seats,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, January 14, 2021, <https://www.sltrib.com/news/politics/2021/01/14/latter-day-saints-are/>.

41. “What Is the Role of Politics in the Lives of Mormons?” *You Tube*, uploaded by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, August 29, 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=rSxbEbxQVo. In this video, several members of the Church talk about their political views, and none of them mention a party. Several express gratitude for the Church’s political neutrality.

Yet Mormon canon suggests that carving people into identity groups is not something that occurs in Godly communities.⁴² This is remarkably analogous to Haslanger's comments regarding the injustice of making race and gender attributions. By placing specific persons into general categories, we may come to see ourselves and others as mere tokens, rather than as fully realized individual human beings. Maybe this is just too bad; maybe human observation makes race or gender attributions totally natural, and maybe our own recognition that we are members of certain communities makes tribalism grounded in some MVPI, Mormon or otherwise, inevitable. But even if this is so, Mormon canon invites all to "[put] off the natural man and become a saint through the atonement of Christ the Lord" (Mosiah 3:19). More recently, President Russell M. Nelson wrote:

Labels can be fun and indicate your support for any number of positive things. But if any label replaces your most important identifiers, the results can be spiritually suffocating. I believe that if the Lord were speaking to you directly, the first thing He would make sure you understand is your true identity. My dear friends, you are literally spirit children of God. . . . Make no mistake about it: Your potential is divine. With your diligent seeking, God will give you glimpses of who you may become.⁴³

So even though an attribution of Mormon political identity *can*, at times, be made on deliberative, strategic, or tribal grounds, the ethical and theological legitimacy of such a move appears suspect. This is interesting in part because, as a practical matter, probably most of us do make identity attributions quite reflexively—even inevitably. But posing, to ourselves and others, normative questions *about* those attributions, and how they structure our lives, is *not* inevitable. One such question is: *Should* "Mormon" carry political weight?

42. 4 Nephi 1:17 ("There were no robbers, nor murderers, neither were there Lamanites, nor any manner of -ites; but they were in one, the children of Christ, and heirs to the kingdom of God."); Moses 7:18 ("And the Lord called his people Zion, because they were of one heart and one mind, and dwelt in righteousness; and there was no poor among them.").

43. Russell M. Nelson, Instagram post, quoted by Mary Richards, "President Nelson Posts About Labels and True Identity," *Church News*, July 20, 2022, <https://www.thechurchnews.com/2022/7/20/23278316/president-nelson-instagram-facebook-post-labels-true-identity/>.

4. THE POINT OF MORMON IDENTITY

The liberal ideal of the rational (or at least self-interested) voter surely describes *many* people, but what ultimately determines most WEIRD political outcomes is tribal coalition-building. This suggests two related approaches to political victory. One is to strengthen the association between personal and political identity among one's allies. The other is to weaken the association between personal and political identity among one's opponents. Easier said than done, perhaps, given the aforementioned paths *between* identities. Consider the following case:

1. Anakin regards himself as Mormon and a Democrat. He associates with many Mormon Republicans, who like to point out the ways in which his politics seem incompatible with Mormon belief. Eventually, Anakin resigns his membership in the LDS church.

There are a variety of reasons why Anakin's case might come out this way, but the most obvious is that he identified more strongly as a Democrat than as a Mormon. Once he was persuaded of the incompatibility, he shed the lower-priority identity. Anyone who regards this as a tragedy or a loss might think that it would have been better for Anakin if his Mormon identity was stronger and more encompassing, so that Anakin would be less likely (or less able?) to shed it. Or they might think that it would have been better for Anakin if his Mormon identity was weaker and encompassed less, so that Anakin would be less likely to find incompatibilities between Mormonism and his other identities. What these conflicting views share, however, is the sense that Mormon identity should function to *keep people affiliated*—presumably for their own spiritual good. The risk here is that boundaries for keeping people *in* may also function to keep people *out*. This seems like a good reason for Mormon doctrine and practice to reject the formation of a strong Mormon political identity.

But consider a slightly different case:

2. Eiko regards herself as Mormon and Republican. She associates with many fiscal conservatives who oppose expansion of the Child Tax Credit (CTC). But Eiko thinks the CTC is beneficial to large families, which are disproportionately Mormon, and in part due to Eiko's advocacy, the Republican National Committee becomes less fiscally conservative, endorsing a CTC expansion.

Again, there may be a variety of reasons for Eiko's experience to come out this way, but the most obvious is that a strong Mormon identity can in-

fluence allied identities. We might call this “homogenization” or perhaps, more poetically, “harmonization.” Advocates for such an approach think Mormon identity should function not just to keep people “in,” but to *bring people in*, by persuading them to adopt suggested values. The risk here is that roads between allies run both ways. Insofar as “Mormon” functions as a political identity, any person or organization (like the Church) that seeks to preserve traditional Mormon values must always be alert to the possibility that Mormon self-conception will drift as a result of influence from “friendly” outsiders. This seems like a good reason for Mormon doctrine and practice to *embrace* the formation of a strong Mormon political identity.

Ultimately, then, to decline to wield Mormonism, as a concept, in furtherance of the Mormon community’s preferred political ends, is to decline to wield a considerable portion of power with which much good might theoretically be done. But to take up that power may subject Mormon religious identity to greater influence from “worldly” politics—potentially interfering with the identity’s basic character and aims. This is not a new thought; the authors of the American Bill of Rights were just as loath to see politics interfere in religion, as to see religion interfere in politics. Nor is it novel to point out that contemporary identitarianism has imparted something of a religious character to a great many political identities—races, ethnicities, and all. But it might be novel to suggest that official Church *ambivalence* toward the term “Mormon,” combined with neither clear prohibition nor explicit development of Mormon political identity, furnishes a promising model for decoupling religious identity attributions from the contentious, consensus-demanding process of contemporary political coalition-building.

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Saving Alvin: Interpretation of Modern Revelation and Redemption of the Dead

by Chad L. Nielsen

INTRODUCTION

Evangelical theologian Millard J. Erickson once observed that “the fact is that our utilization of the Bible will be influenced by what we think about its nature. We will, whether consciously or unconsciously, be dealing with it on the basis of an implicit theory of its nature. It is therefore desirable to think out our view of inspiration.”¹ The same can be said about the additional scriptures included in the canon of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, including the Doctrine and Covenants.

Two of the most influential twentieth-century Latter-day Saint leaders in the field of doctrine and theology were Joseph Fielding Smith and Bruce R. McConkie. Both were prolific writers and self-appointed defenders (and definers) of orthodoxy who were deeply invested in the Latter-day Saint scriptures. A critical assumption about the nature of scripture that influenced these two authors was that the scriptures and the inspired teachings of modern prophets formed a unified set of doctrine, inspired and directed by God. One area in which this can be observed in comparison to other interpreters of Latter-day Saint doctrine is their approach to the redemption of the dead. It can be argued, however, that other ap-

1. Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Baker Academic, 2013), 172.

proaches are better able to make sense of Joseph Smith's doctrinal statements concerning the subject.

In this paper, it will be argued that an interpretation of the scripture and theory of inspiration that views individual revelations as fossilized snapshots of an evolving theology is one example of a more productive approach to interpretation of Joseph Smith's work. The views of Joseph Fielding Smith and Bruce R. McConkie will be contrasted to the proposed theory of inspiration and interpretation. To do so, developments in the theology of the redemption of the unbaptized dead that are found in the revelations of Joseph Smith will be examined, using Alvin Smith as a point of reference.

BRUCE R. MCCONKIE AND JOSEPH FIELDING SMITH'S APPROACH

Bruce R. McConkie and Joseph Fielding Smith both are examples of a specific approach that resembles the assumptions of univocality and the infallibility of scriptures of some mainline Christian interpreters of the scripture. McConkie, for example, believed that "truth is always in harmony with itself. The word of the Lord is truth, and no scripture ever contradicts another, nor is any inspired statement of any person out of harmony with an inspired statement of another person. . . . When we find seeming conflicts, it means we have not as yet caught the full vision of whatever points are involved."² Those "seeming conflicts" were puzzles to be solved as part of assembling a systematic theology: "One of the things that I enjoy doing more than anything else is just the simple matter of studying the doctrines of the gospel and organizing them by subject and analyzing doctrinal problems."³ Reading with this approach to exegesis, the Book of Mormon, various visions and revelations, and other teachings of Joseph Smith are not snapshots of an evolving theology, but expressions of revealed truth that all need to be reconciled to each other.

While the inclusion of the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants placed McConkie outside of Protestant approaches, his methodology does have precedent from fundamentalist and evangelical

2. Bruce R. McConkie, "Finding Answers to Gospel Questions," in *Teaching Seminary: Preservice Readings* (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2004), 43, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/teaching-seminary-preservice-readings-religion-370-471-and-475/finding-answers-to-gospel-questions>.

3. David Croft, "Spare Time's Rare to Apostle," *Church News*, January 24, 1976, 4.

Christians. As a point of comparison, we have a classic statement of infallibility of the Bible by A. A. Hodge and B. B. Warfield. They wrote about “the superintendence by God of the writers in the entire process of their writing, which accounts for nothing whatsoever but the absolute infallibility of the record.” They allowed for some influence in wording from human writers, noting that “all parties of believers admit that this genesis of Holy Scripture was the result of the co-operation, in various ways, of the agency of men and of the agency of God,” and thus, “it is not merely in the matter of verbal expression or literary composition that the personal idiosyncrasies of each author are freely manifested.” Yet, “throughout the whole of his work the Holy Spirit was present, causing his energies to flow into the spontaneous exercises of the writer’s faculties . . . everywhere securing the errorless expression in language of the thought designed by God.” As a result, the Bible was seen as having divine authorship that led to its infallibility and authority as a rule of faith and practice.⁴ McConkie’s approach to scripture seems to rely on the same assumptions, though extending them to include the Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants as part of the scriptural corpus superintended by God.

The result of this reading in McConkie’s theology is a limited salvation in the afterlife. He accepted proxy work for the dead as an opportunity for salvation, but placed limitations on those who would benefit from this work, based on Joseph Smith’s earlier revelations of the 1820s and 1830s:

There is no such thing as a second chance to gain salvation. This life is the time and the day of our probation. After this day of life, which is given us to prepare for eternity, then cometh the night of darkness wherein there can be no labor performed.

For those who do not have an opportunity to believe and obey the holy word in this life, the first chance to gain salvation will come in the spirit world. If those who hear the word for the first time in the realms ahead are the kind of people who would have accepted the gospel here, had the opportunity been afforded them, they will accept it there. Salvation for the dead is for those whose first chance to gain salvation is in the spirit world. . . .

There is no other promise of salvation than the one recited in [D&C 137]. Those who reject the gospel in this life and then receive it in the spirit world go not to the celestial, but to the terrestrial kingdom.⁵

4. A. A. Hodge and B. B. Warfield, “Inspiration,” *Presbyterian Review*, no. 6 (April 1881): 225–60, <https://archive.org/details/presbyterianrevi2618unse/page/225/mode/1up>.

5. Bruce R. McConkie, “The Seven Deadly Heresies,” *BYU Speeches*, June 1, 1980, <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/bruce-r-mcconkie/seven-deadly-heresies/>.

One can see references to the words of Amulek in the Book of Mormon and sections 137 and 76 in the Doctrine and Covenants all balanced against each other in a way that McConkie felt reconciled them to each other and smoothed out contradictions.

Bruce R. McConkie was heavily influenced by his father-in-law, Joseph Fielding Smith, in his pursuit of a systematic theology. Joseph Fielding Smith was, in turn, influenced by his father, Joseph F. Smith. As Joseph F. Smith's biographer, Stephen C. Tayson, wrote: "JFS had recognized his son's tremendous capacity for scriptural and doctrinal mastery early on. He had also trained him in the art of doctrinal innovation. . . . For years, JFS had privately counseled with his namesake on doctrinal questions that came before him."⁶ Joseph F. Smith wanted to create a coherent and orderly system of theology, liturgy, and doctrine. He was heavily influenced by Apostle Orson Pratt, who believed that "one test of doctrine was how well it fit within the larger system of accepted theology, which consisted of scripture and Joseph Smith's teachings,"⁷ which was part of what he passed on to his namesake son.

This background created a worldview for Joseph Fielding Smith where the magisterial authority of current Church leaders to determine doctrine was tempered by the authority of the scriptural canon. On one occasion, he wrote "when prophets write and speak on the principles of the gospel, they should have the guidance of the Spirit. If they do, then all that they say will be in harmony with the revealed word." Emphasizing the point, he added, "Should a man speak or write, and what he says is in conflict with the standards which are accepted, with the revelations the Lord has given, then we may reject what he has said, no matter who he is."⁸ On another occasion, he added: "My words, and the teachings of any other member of the Church, high or low, if they do not square with the revelations, we need not accept them."⁹ Established scriptures, not progressive revelations, were the measuring rod for all future teachings and revelations.

The underlying assumption that Joseph Fielding Smith brought to this idea was partly due to the fact that, as Matthew Bowman has noted, he embraced a form of the Protestant theology "plenary inspiration" in his

6. Stephen C. Tayson, *Like a Fiery Meteor: The Life of Joseph F. Smith* (University of Utah Press, 2023), 336.

7. Tayson, 158.

8. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation: Sermons and Writings of Joseph Fielding Smith*, edited by Bruce R. McConkie, 3 vols. (Bookcraft, 1954–56), 1:187.

9. Smith, 3:203.

approach to Latter-day Saint scriptures. The idea is that while the original manuscripts of scriptures may not be extant, they were directly inspired by God.¹⁰ In Smith's polemical writings, he indicated that "no man, in and of himself, without the aid of the Spirit of God and the direction of revelation, can found a religion, or promulgate a body of doctrine, in all particulars in harmony with revealed truth." He added, "This is proved to be the case with many professed founders of religious creeds. Their teachings cannot be made to square themselves with the revelations of Jesus Christ and his prophets."¹¹ He believed that for Joseph Smith Jr., on the other hand, "in the plan of salvation, as it was made known through Joseph Smith to the world, there are no flaws. Each part fits perfectly and makes the whole complete" and there was nothing "that is inconsistent, or out of harmony in the revelations to Joseph Smith, with that which has been revealed before."¹² With the Bible, any errors of contradictions were the result of later meddling, rather than the original prophets: "We will cling to the Bible because we know that whatever errors there are, they are the errors of uninspired men who have done the translating."¹³ For Joseph Fielding Smith, plenary inspiration came with the assumption that everything in the scriptures was inspired and would fit together perfectly.

By extension of this assumption, Joseph Fielding Smith demonstrated a belief in a tight control over the revelatory process that Joseph Smith Jr. experienced:

There is a beautiful thread of consistency running through the scheme of gospel restoration. Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery could not foresee the end from the beginning, but the Lord was the Architect, and made known to them little by little, as knowledge and organization was needed until the perfect structure of the Church was restored.

Inspiration is discovered in the fact that each part, as it was revealed, dovetailed perfectly with what had come before. *There was no need for eliminating, changing, or adjusting any part to make it fit; but each new revelation on doctrine and priesthood fitted in its place perfectly to complete the whole structure, as it had been prepared by the Master Builder.*¹⁴

10. See Matthew Bowman, *Joseph Fielding Smith: A Mormon Theologian* (University of Illinois Press, 2024), 23.

11. Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 1:189.

12. Joseph Fielding Smith, Conference Report, April 1920, 106.

13. Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 3:188.

14. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Church News*, September 9, 1933, 4, cited in Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 1:170 (emphasis in original).

If the Lord had tight control, then the revelations should reflect a consistent perspective that was revealed bit by bit, like the gradual lifting of a curtain to reveal a set stage. This was a form of univocality applied to Latter-day Saint scriptures.

Since his background assumptions about the inspiration and unity of Latter-day Saint scriptures resemble those of Bruce R. McConkie, we should expect that Joseph Fielding Smith would approach the topic of salvation for the dead in a similar manner. Indeed, on one occasion, he cited Amulek's words that "this life is the day for men to perform their labors," and taught that "these people to whom Amulek was speaking had heard the truth and were not altogether ignorant of the plan of salvation, because they had gone out of Church by apostasy. So he declared unto them that this is the day for them to repent and turn unto God or they would be lost."¹⁵ On another occasion, after citing the vision of the celestial kingdom that included Alvin, Joseph Fielding Smith wrote that "the Lord did not say that all who are dead are entitled to these blessings in the celestial kingdom. . . . The privilege of exaltation is not held out to those who have had the opportunity to receive Christ and obey his truth and who have refused to do so."¹⁶ In referencing the 1832 vision, he also wrote that "[w]e learn that those who rejected the gospel when it was offered them in ancient times, but afterwards accepted the 'testimony of Jesus' in the spirit world when it was declared to them, and who were honorable men of the earth, are assigned to the terrestrial glory, not the celestial."¹⁷ And when discussing vicarious work for the dead, he said that "work for the dead is not intended for those who had every opportunity to receive it, who had it taught to them, and who then refused to receive it, or had not interest enough to attend to these ordinances when they were living."¹⁸ While each of these statements were made on different occasions, they represent some consistent thoughts from President Smith.

One can see how the three scriptures Joseph Fielding Smith referenced (Amulek's words and D&C 76 and 137) are balanced in light of each other, much as they were by Bruce R. McConkie. Section 76 provides the

15. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Relief Society Magazine*, 6:466, cited in Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 2:181.

16. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Church News*, August 5, 1939, cited in Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 2:182–83.

17. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Church News*, February 1, 1936, 5, cited in Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 2:183.

18. Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 2:184.

idea that those who received not the testimony of Jesus in the flesh but afterwards received it are only able to access the terrestrial kingdom. Section 137 provides the thought that people who would have accepted the gospel, *given the chance to do so*, could still access the celestial kingdom. Smith put the two together and taught that section 76 meant that people who did have the chance to receive the gospel were the ones limited to terrestrial glory while those who did not had an opportunity to go to the celestial kingdom instead. His interpretation of Amulek's words in the Book of Mormon builds on this by adding the idea that Amulek was talking to people who had their chance already and thus would be limited to terrestrial glory if they did not repent during mortality. By doing this, he both worked to smooth out contradictions between revelations and limited opportunities for repentance in the spirit world in his systematic theology.

As a relevant point of comparison, Millard J. Erickson discussed the nature of inspiration in the scriptures from an Evangelical Christian perspective. He parsed out the difference between revelation (communication from God) and inspiration (the communication of ideas to other humans through writing under the influence of the Holy Spirit, resulting in those writings becoming the Word of God). Then, he suggested that there are five different theories of revelation, including the intuition theory, the illumination theory, the dynamic theory, the verbal theory, and the dictation theory. The first two of the five theories aren't particularly relevant, but the views McConkie and Smith expressed about the Doctrine and Covenants and other scriptures most closely resemble the verbal theory, which "insists that the Holy Spirit's influences extends beyond the direction of thoughts to the selection of words used to convey the message," or the dictation theory, which holds that "God actually dictated the Bible to the writers." The theory of inspiration being discussed in this paper, however, more closely resembles the dynamic theory, which "emphasizes the combination of divine and human elements in the process of inspiration and the writing of the Bible."¹⁹

THEORY OF REVELATION

The theories of inspiration on which Bruce R. McConkie and Joseph Fielding Smith relied rest on specific assumptions about the nature of the revelations that Joseph Smith recorded. Most significant was the idea that the revelations were superintended by God to the point that

19. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 174–75.

they accurately represented His omniscient perspective. The question at the heart of this essay, then, is whether the texts represented unfiltered and fully inspired messages from God or whether they were written from Smith's perspectives and words, attempting to capture what had been communicated to him. Thus, it is important to examine what we know about his revelatory process.

There is ambiguity in the historical record about the process that makes it difficult to know exactly how Smith received the "word of the Lord" revelations, such as those in the Doctrine and Covenants. As Terryl L. Givens and others have observed, the types of revelation that Joseph Smith experienced differ from what most Protestant and Catholic Christians regard as revelation. For example, it doesn't seem to fall neatly into any of the categories of Avery Dulles, resembling more closely the inner light of Quakers or the immediate revelation of Ann Hutchinson.²⁰ The earliest revelations were dictated with the aid of seer stones. Smith would discontinue using the seer stones for the revelations sometime in 1829 or early 1830.²¹ He then dictated the majority of his revelations, in the words of Orson Pratt, "as the inspiration of the Holy Ghost rested upon him."²² In both cases, we aren't entirely sure what the full process of receiving the revelations was like for Smith. As a result, even among those who believe that the revelations are authentic, there has been an ongoing debate on whether they are word-for-word accounts of what the Lord said (or that even if they were in Smith's words, they accurately represent the Lord's mind) or whether the revelations were conceptual in nature and Smith worked to capture them in words from his limited perspective.

20. See Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture that Launched a New World Religion* (Oxford University Press, 2002), 208–39; Terryl L. Givens, *Wrestling the Angel: The Foundations of Mormon Thought: Cosmos, God, Humanity* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 75–83. See also Avery Dulles, *Models of Revelation* (Gill and Macmillan, 1983), 19; Janiece Johnson, *Revelation: Themes in the Doctrine and Covenants* (Maxwell Institute, 2024), 19–22.

21. See "Seer Stone," Glossary, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/topic/seer-stone>. Dale E. Luffman noted that the final of the five revelations received in connection with the Whitmer family in June 1829 (D&C 14–18) is likely "the last inspired document issued by Joseph Smith Jr. using the seer stone." Dale E. Luffman, *Commentary on the Community of Christ Doctrine and Covenants: Volume 1: The Joseph Smith Jr. Era* (Herald House, 2019), 75.

22. Orson Pratt, July 10, 1859, *Journal of Discourses* (LDS Booksellers Depot, 1854–86), 7:176.

As a result, within Mormon studies, there are variations in understanding how tightly the Lord controlled the language of the revelations, just as with the Book of Mormon translation process.²³ For example, if God exercised tight control over the wording of the texts, it would tend to favor a univocal view of the revelations, since God would know the end from the beginning and reveal a consistent viewpoint throughout. If, on the other hand, communication from God to Joseph Smith Jr. was conceptual in nature and Smith worked to capture those concepts in the written texts, it would allow for an evolutionary view of the revelations, since it makes space for the limitations of Smith's personal knowledge and his development as new information was communicated.

Part of the difficulty in answering the extent to which the revelation texts were influenced by Smith and the extent to which they were the specific words of God is that the early Latter Day Saints left contradictory evidence about the nature of the revelations. On the one hand, the early Saints viewed these written documents as carrying more authority than oral statements of Smith.²⁴ Even within a month of his own death, Smith assigned a special authority of inerrancy to his revelations, despite personal weaknesses: "I never told you I was perfect—but there is no error in the revelations which I have taught."²⁵ Descriptions of Smith receiving revelations like the one found in *The Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt* tend to further this image with statements that Smith dictated his revelations without "hesitation, reviewing, or reading back," and that they didn't "undergo revisions, interlinings, or corrections. As he dictated them so they stood, so far as I have witnessed."²⁶ These pieces of information imply that

23. For an overview of perspectives on Book of Mormon translation, see John-Charles Duffy, "The 'Book of Mormon Translation' Essay in Historical Context," in *The LDS Gospel Topics Series: A Scholarly Engagement*, edited by Matthew L. Harris and Newell G. Bringhurst (Signature Books, 2020), 97–130.

24. The most famous incident of this sort is John Whitmer's refusal to serve as Church historian unless the Lord would "manifest it through Joseph the Seer," though several other examples of the authority of the written revelations exist. Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (Vintage Books, 2007), 129.

25. "Discourse, 12 May 1844, as Reported by Thomas Bullock," Documents, The Joseph Smith Papers, 2, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-12-may-1844-as-reported-by-thomas-bullock/2>.

26. Parley P. Pratt, *The Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt*, edited by Parley P. Pratt Jr. (Law, King & Law, 1888), 65–66, <https://archive.org/details/autobiographyofp00prat/page/64/mode/2up>.

the Prophet was sharing word-for-word accounts of what God was saying to him and the texts that resulted from this dictation came out perfect.

On the other hand, there is evidence that Joseph Smith and other early Church leaders didn't see the revelations as perfect representations of the Lord's voice. Section 1, for example, openly states that "these commandments are of me & were given unto my Servents in their weakness after the manner of their Language."²⁷ Smith received the revelations in an ongoing process, sometimes compiling multiple revelations received over time into one revelation, or returning later to revise and update previous revelations—something that the Joseph Smith Papers Project has made abundantly clear, quite to the contrary of Parley P. Pratt's statement.²⁸ When a Church conference asked Smith in 1831 to "correct those errors or mistakes which he may discover by the Holy Spirit," the request was both acceptable to the Prophet and carried out by him on multiple occasions.²⁹ These data points indicate that the process of recording the will of the Lord in text was seen as an ongoing, dynamic process that included the potential for refinement.

When it comes to describing how revelations are received, the Doctrine and Covenants includes statements like "you must study it out in your mind," rather than simply asking with no thought beforehand,³⁰ and

27. "Revelation, 1 November 1831–B [D&C 1]," Revelation Book 1, The Joseph Smith Papers.

28. See Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 174; Grant Underwood, "Relishing the Revisions: The Doctrine & Covenants and the Revelatory Process," in *The Expanded Canon: Perspectives on Mormonism & Sacred Texts*, edited by Blair G. Van Dyke, Brian D. Birch, Boyd J. Peterson (Greg Kofford Books, 2018), 171–84; Mark L. Staker, "'Commissioned of Jesus Christ': Oliver Cowdery and D&C 13," in *You Shall Have My Word: Exploring the Text of the Doctrine and Covenants*, edited by Scott C. Esplin, Richard O. Cowan, and Rachel Cope (Brigham Young University Religious Studies Center, 2012), <https://rsc.byu.edu/you-shall-have-my-word/commissioned-jesus-christ-oliver-cowdery-dc-13>; William V. Smith, "Early Mormon Priesthood Revelations: Text, Impact, and Evolution," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 46, no. 4 (Winter 2013): 1–84, <https://www.dialoguejournal.com/articles/early-mormon-priesthood-revelation-text-impact-and-evolution/>.

29. See Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 173–74.

30. "Revelation, April 1829–D [D&C 9]," The Joseph Smith Papers, 21, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-april-1829-d-dc-9/2>. Compare Doctrine and Covenants 9:7–8.

that understanding comes “by study, and also, by faith.”³¹ Joseph Smith also described in one discourse that the “Holy Ghost has no other effect than pure intelligence” and that it works by “expanding the mind enlightening the understanding & storing the intellect with present knowledge.” Likewise, the “Spirit of Revelation” was characterized by “pure Intelligence flowing into you” and “sudden strokes of ideas.”³² It may be that the strokes of ideas and pure intelligence were concepts and thoughts that came through the Spirit, but not necessarily specific words—those had to be worked out later as an attempt to capture and communicate the actual revelation. While records of angelic visitations and visions of God indicate that this was not the only way Joseph Smith reported that he received revelations, it does seem to be a major part of the revelatory process for him.

The information above seems to indicate that the revelations were not seen by Smith as pure dictations from God, but rather conceptual revelations followed by an effort on Smith's part to capture those revelations in the English language. As an example of commentators who accepted this understanding of conceptual revelation, Lowell L. Bennion believed that “revelation is a response to man's thinking in man's language. . . . It's not all divine dictation.”³³ After pointing out some of the evidence mentioned above, Latter-day Saint scholar Philip Barlow noted that Smith “does not generally seem to have conceived of his revelations as verbally exact dictations from God that he then recorded in secretarial fashion. More often, the language used is apparently his own attempt to convey the ideas of the revelations he experienced.”³⁴ Steven C. Harper wrote that “Joseph knew better than anyone else that the words he dictated were both human and divine, the voice of God clothed in the words of his own limited, early American English vocabulary. He regarded himself as a revelator whose

31. “Revelation, 27–28 December 1832 [D&C 88:1–126],” The Joseph Smith Papers, 45, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-27-28-december-1832-dc-881-126/13>. Compare Doctrine and Covenants 88:118.

32. “Discourse, between circa 26 June and circa 2 July 1839, as Reported by Willard Richards,” Documents, The Joseph Smith Papers, 21, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-between-circa-26-june-and-circa-2-july-1839-as-reported-by-willard-richards/7>.

33. Cited in George B. Handley, *Lowell L. Bennion: A Mormon Educator* (University of Illinois Press, 2023), 14.

34. Philip L. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible: The Place of the Latter-day Saints in American Religion*, updated ed. (Oxford University Press, 2013), 23–24.

understanding accumulated over time.”³⁵ In each of these statements, the words of the scriptures, including the Doctrine and Covenants, are shaped by the authors and the humanity of those writers as they captured their experiences of revelation and inspiration. To demonstrate an approach to interpreting the Doctrine and Covenants based on this understanding, attention will now be turned to the doctrine of the redemption of the dead.

A HISTORY OF THE REDEMPTION OF THE DEAD IN JOSEPH SMITH’S REVELATIONS

In 1823, Alvin Smith suddenly became ill. He died a short time later in great pain.³⁶ Alvin seems to have been considered the brightest and best of the Smith brothers, even within his own family.³⁷ Lucy Mack Smith would later write that “Alvin was a youth of singular goodness of disposition—kind and amiable; so that lamentation and mourning filled the whole neighborhood, when he died,”³⁸ while Joseph Smith Jr. recalled, “He was the oldest, and the noblest of my fathers family. He was one of the noblest of the sons of men.”³⁹ Yet, according to William Smith, at Alvin’s funeral, a local Presbyterian minister “intimated very strongly that [Alvin] had gone to hell, for Alvin was not a church member, but he was a good boy and my father did not like it.”⁴⁰ Apparently, this did not sit well with William’s older brother either: throughout his life, Joseph Smith Jr. grappled with the question of what became of Alvin and people like him—uncatechized and unbaptized individuals who were good people. As Samuel

35. Steven C. Harper, “‘That They Might Come to Understanding’: Revelation as Process,” in *You Shall Have My Word: Exploring the Text of the Doctrine and Covenants*, edited by Scott C. Esplin, Richard O. Cowan, and Rachel Cope (Brigham Young University Religious Studies Center, 2012), <https://rsc.byu.edu/you-shall-have-my-word/they-might-come-understanding-revelation-process>.

36. See Samuel Morris Brown, *In Heaven as it is on Earth: Joseph Smith and the Early Mormon Conquest of Death* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 22–29.

37. For a discussion of Alvin’s role in the Smith family, see Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 42, 45–46, 54–55.

38. “Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1845,” The Joseph Smith Papers, 92, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/lucy-mack-smith-history-1845/99>.

39. “Journal, December 1841–December 1842,” The Joseph Smith Papers, 180, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/journal-december-1841-december-1842/57>.

40. William Smith, interview by E. C. Briggs and J. W. Peterson, October or November 1893, originally published in *Zion’s Ensign*; reprinted in *Deseret Evening News*, January 20, 1893, 2.

Morris Brown wrote, “Though it would be overly simplistic to attribute all of Smith’s religious activity to Alvin, this death cast a long shadow over Joseph Jr.’s career.”⁴¹ Grappling with this question was one contributing factor to an evolution of theology concerning the redemption of the dead over his lifetime, which has been interpreted in different ways.

The earliest extant examples of this wrestling come from the Book of Mormon (recorded in 1828–1829) and contemporary revelations—particularly the revelation now known as Doctrine and Covenants 19—which offer a complicated glimpse into views on redemption and the dead and universalism.

Joseph Smith lived in a context where universalism was a major part of the religious discussion. Universalists argued that God is a benevolent and generous being whose attributes of love and justice were incompatible with widespread condemnation and permanent torment. They also held that God would not allow Himself to be defeated by Satan and would overcome the effects of Satan’s work by restoring all His creation to its original, pre-Fall glory. Many early Latter-day Saints held universalist beliefs prior to conversion—Joseph Knight and Martin Harris being prominent among them.

Joseph Smith’s own family was heavily influenced by universalist beliefs. For example, Joseph Smith’s paternal grandfather, Asael Smith, was a universalist who believed that Christ “came to Save Sinners nearly because they [were] such” and that “if you believe that Christ [came] to save Sinners . . . that Sinners must be saved by the righteousness of Christ alone, without mixing any of their own righteousness with his; then you will See that he can as well Save all, as aney.”⁴² Asael was drawn to the teachings of a preacher named John Murray, from whom he drew many of his ideas of universalism. Murray taught that while hell and punishment existed, they were way stations to redemption. He reasoned, “It is one thing to be *punished with everlasting destruction*, and another to be *everlastingly punished with destruction*.” The comparison he used was that “if your candle were to burn to endless ages, and you put your finger into that candle, but for a moment, you would suffer, for that moment, the pain of

41. See Brown, *In Heaven as it is on Earth*, 35.

42. Asael Smith, “A Few Words of Advice Which I Leave to You My Dear Wife and Children Whom I Expect Ear Long to Leave,” in Richard Lloyd Anderson, *Joseph Smith’s New England Heritage: Influences of Grandfathers Solomon Mack and Asael Smith*, rev. 2nd ed. (Deseret Book and BYU Press, 2003), 160–65.

everlasting fire.”⁴³ Joseph Smith Sr. inherited many of Asael’s beliefs and they would have likely been discussed in his household during Joseph Smith Jr.’s youth as a result.

It is interesting to note that there are parallels between Murray’s sermons and the 1829 revelation that is now section 19. The text of the revelation indicates that the ways the Lord uses the words *everlasting* and *eternal* in the context of punishment was intended to trick people into believing that they need to reform their lives to avoid unending punishment, but it really means that He will punish them with the type of punishment that a being who holds the titles of Endless and Everlasting will wield:

Nevertheless, it is not written, that there shall be no end to this torment; but it is written endless torment. . . . For behold, the mystery of Godliness how great is it! For behold I am endless, and the punishment which is given from my hand, is endless punishment, for endless is my name: Wherefore—Eternal punishment is God’s punishment. Endless punishment is God’s punishment.⁴⁴

The wordplay of “endless” and “eternal” here, as a condition of the punishment in relation to its nature rather than its duration, seems similar to John Murray’s approach to dismissing everlasting as a condition of the flame rather than the duration of the pain.

There is tension, however, between the text of this revelation and the Book of Mormon, which was being translated around the same time that the revelation was received. In the Book of Mormon, Nehor and his followers are presented as one of the primary groups of villains, and they seem to be a negative caricature of universalists. Nehor, for example, goes around preaching, “All mankind should be saved at the last day, and that they need not fear nor tremble, but that they might lift up their heads and rejoice; for the Lord had created all men, and had also redeemed all men; and, in the end, all men should have eternal life” (Alma 1:4).

The prophet Alma and his teaching companion, Amulek, spend a considerable amount of their ministries working in opposition to Nehor’s followers. One example is when Alma preaches in a stronghold of Nehor’s religion that after judgment, those who do not bring “forth fruit meet for repentance” will be in a condition “as though there had been no redemption made; for they cannot be redeemed according to God’s justice” (Alma

43. John Murray, *Letters and Sketches of Sermons* (Joshua Belcher, 1812), 2:253.

44. “Revelation, circa Summer 1829 [D&C 19],” The Joseph Smith Papers, 39, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-circa-summer-1829-dc-19/1>. Compare Doctrine and Covenants 19:6, 10–12.

12:15, 18). He also worked to explain to his wayward son, “the justice of God in the punishment of the sinner; for ye do try to suppose that it is injustice that the sinner should be consigned to a state of misery” (Alma 42:1). Amulek, if anything, is even more blunt and straightforward about rejecting the universalist beliefs of Nehor, teaching that “if we do not improve our time while in this life, then cometh the night of darkness wherein there can be no labor performed. . . . For behold, if ye have procrastinated the day of your repentance even until death, behold, ye have become subjected to the spirit of the devil . . . and this is the final state of the wicked” (Alma 34:34). Thus, sections of the Book of Mormon were written in opposition to ideas that seem similar to universalism.

Yet, even theology in the Book of Mormon is complicated. Mark A. Wrathall, for example, pointed out that figures in the Book of Mormon such as Alma or Moroni used words like “endless” and “eternal” to describe torment and death that ended within a specified time frame.⁴⁵ His conclusion was that “when something is described as *eternal* in the book of Alma, it means that the eternal thing is incapable of being diminished by time. In other words, not that it actually does exist forever, but it could exist forever without changing in any essential respect,”⁴⁶ much like Murray’s eternal fire. And there are statements that God will not condemn individuals who were not aware of the law, such as when King Benjamin told his people that the blood of the Christ “atoneth for the sins of those who have fallen by the transgression of Adam, who have died not knowing the will of God concerning them, or who have ignorantly sinned” (Mosiah 3:11). These expressions about God’s judgment in the Book of Mormon are more in line with what is expressed in section 19.

Joseph Smith Jr. would have had hope for Alvin from these revelations, since he would eventually be redeemed, though the path to that redemption was ambiguous at best. Smith’s later revelations seem to demonstrate an effort to reconcile the universalist tendencies displayed in section 19 on one side and the consignment to a state of misery displayed in parts of the Book of Mormon on the other.

The next major shift in thought about redemption for the dead came with the idea of a tripartite heaven with the telestial, terrestrial, and celestial kingdoms, which is laid out in the vision experienced on February 16, 1832 (D&C 76). In the text, there are four possible destinations in

45. He specifically mentions Alma 36:10, Alma 36:12, and Mormon 9:13.

46. Mark A. Wrathall, *Alma 30–63: a brief theological introduction* (Maxwell Institute, 2020), 80.

the afterlife outlined (a place for the “sons of perdition” being the fourth option). Conditions for entering each destination are given. Of particular note for the redemption of the dead, the terrestrial kingdom is the destination of “the spirits of men kept in prison, whom the Son visited, and preached the gospel unto them . . . who received not the testimony of Jesus in the flesh, but afterwards received it” (D&C 76:71–73). This would indicate that salvation for the dead would only extend as far as the terrestrial rather than the celestial kingdom. Also of note, the statement that “where God and Christ dwell they cannot come, worlds without end” (D&C 76:112), stated in relation to the telestial kingdom. This latter statement would seem to indicate that there are not opportunities to transfer between kingdoms later on (or at least the telestial to higher kingdoms). Based on the 1832 vision, people like Alvin “who received not the testimony of Jesus in the flesh but afterwards received it” would be assigned to the terrestrial rather than the celestial kingdom.

Four years later, however, another vision shifted how the assignment of individuals to the terrestrial and celestial kingdoms was understood. In the House of the Lord in Kirtland, Joseph Smith experienced a vision where he saw “the celestial kingdom of God, and the glory thereof” (D&C 137:1). Among the people who Smith reported seeing in that place was “my brother Alvin that has long since slept.” He openly expressed surprise about this, stating that he “marveled how it was that he had obtained an inheritance in that kingdom, seeing that he had departed this life before the Lord had set his hand to gather Israel the second time, and had not been baptized for the remission of sins” (D&C 137:6). This was a different picture than the one that the 1832 vision had painted for Alvin’s fate, thus Joseph Smith’s surprise. (This also indicates that the 1832 vision was not written from an omniscient perspective that already knew of the content of this 1836 vision.)

Continuing with the 1836 vision, Smith reported hearing the voice of the Lord explaining that “all who have died without a knowledge of this gospel, who would have received it if they had been permitted to tarry, shall be heirs of the celestial kingdom of God” (D&C 137:7). Gregory A. Prince pointed out the significance of this vision: “This vision represented a major shift in Latter-day Saint theology and negated an important point of the 1832 vision, namely that those dying without baptism could not rise above the Terrestrial Kingdom.”⁴⁷ This 1836 vision acknowledged scenarios where

47. Gregory A. Prince, *Power from on High: The Development of Mormon Priesthood* (Signature Books, 1995), 143. See also Terryl L. Givens, “How Limited

individuals who would have been assigned to the lower kingdoms based on the text of the 1832 vision would have opportunities to be assigned to the celestial kingdom based on God's knowledge of those individuals.

The implementation of proxy baptisms for the dead in 1840 may have opened the possibility for fluid destinations in the eternities even further in Joseph Smith's mind. As Greogry A. Prince observed, the 1836 vision of Alvin "gave no hint that anything must be done by the living to allow the dead entrance into the Celestial Kingdom. Rather, the dead would be judged according to desire, and those deemed willing to receive the gospel would become heirs of salvation."⁴⁸ Yet the Prophet still stuck to the necessity of baptism for salvation. In 1838, a revelation reiterated that "he that believeth and is baptized shall be saved, and he that believeth not, and is not baptized shall be damned."⁴⁹ This tension set up the need for a way to satisfy both the requirement for baptism and for the mercy of God in allowing people like Alvin the opportunity to enter the celestial kingdom.

Ultimately, that tension was resolved by the idea of baptisms for the dead, which was shared at the funeral of Seymour Brunson on August 15, 1840. Joseph Smith read from 1 Corinthians 15 to preface his remarks. Then, as Phebe Woodruff recorded in a letter to her husband,

Brother Joseph . . . has learned by revelation that those in this church may be baptized for any of their relatives who are dead and had not a privilege of hearing this gospel, even for their children, parents, brothers, sisters, grandparents, uncles, and aunts. . . . As soon as they are baptized for their friends they are released from prison and they can claim them in the resurrection and bring them into the celestial kingdom.⁵⁰

Is Postmortal Progression?" *BYU Studies Quarterly* 60 no. 3 (2021): 127–38; Stephen O. Smoot, "Joseph Smith's 1836 Vision of the Celestial Kingdom: A Historical and Contextual Analysis," in *Joseph Smith as a Visionary: Heavenly Manifestations in the Latter Days*, edited by Alonzo L. Gaskill, Stephan D. Taeger, Derek R. Sainsbury, and Roger G. Christensen (BYU Religious Studies Center and Deseret Book, 2024), 209–27.

48. Prince, *Power from on High*, 143.

49. "Revelation, 23 July 1837 [D&C 112]," The Joseph Smith Papers, 73, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-23-july-1837-dc-112/2>. Compare Doctrine and Covenants 112:29.

50. "Letter from Phebe Wittemore Carter Woodruff to Wilford Woodruff, October 6, 1840," The Wilford Woodruff Papers, 2, <https://wilfordwoodruffpapers.org/p/Pxl> (spelling and punctuation modernized).

On a later occasion Joseph Smith added, “It is no more incredible that God should save the dead, than that he should raise the dead. There is never a time when the spirit is too old to approach God. All are within the reach of pardoning mercy, who have not committed the unpardonable sin.”⁵¹ He added that “God hath made a provision that ev[e]ry spirit can be ferreted out in that world that has not sin’d the upardnabl [unpardonable] sin. wether in this world or in the world of spirits. Every man who has a friend in the eternal world who hath not committed the ~~eternal~~ sin unpardonable sin you can save him.”⁵² Through baptism for the dead, salvation seemed to be opened to almost all the unbaptized deceased, as long as there was someone who would do proxy rituals for them.

In contrast to the earliest snapshot of Latter-day Saint theology, the door had been opened for exaltation for virtually all humankind. In the statements above, Joseph Smith makes it clear that he believed that everyone could be saved except the few who committed the ill-defined unpardonable sin. This seems to be a very different take on salvation than the one found in Amulek’s teachings, or even the 1836 vision. Rather than only those who had received the gospel during their lives and those who would have done so if they had the chance, *anyone* who had not committed the unpardonable sin could be redeemed, including Alvin.⁵³

Alvin, of course, would be offered salvation through baptisms for the dead. Joseph Smith told his father (Joseph Smith Sr.) on his deathbed that “that it was then the priviledge of the saints to be baptized for the dead.” This was an idea that the senior Joseph Smith “was delighted to hear, and requested that Joseph should be baptized for Alvin immediately.”⁵⁴ In late 1840, Hyrum Smith was baptized as a proxy for Alvin.⁵⁵ By favoring near-universal salvation being available through baptisms for the dead, Joseph

51. Joseph Smith, “The Doctrine of Baptism for the Dead, 3 October 1841,” *Times and Seasons* 2, no. 24 (October 15, 1841): 577.

52. “Discourse, 7 April 1844, as Reported by William Clayton,” The Joseph Smith Papers, 17, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-7-april-1844-as-reported-by-william-clayton/7>.

53. For further discussion of this idea, see Fiona Givens and Terryl Givens, *The Christ Who Heals: How God Restored the Truth that Saves Us* (Deseret Book, 2017), 118–26 and Givens, “How Limited Is Postmortal Progression?”

54. “Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1845,” The Joseph Smith Papers, 296, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/lucy-mack-smith-history-1845/305>.

55. Nauvoo Baptisms for the Dead, Book A, microfilm no. 183,376, Family History Library, Salt Lake City, UT, microfilm copy, Harold B. Lee Library,

Smith had found a way to reconcile aspects of universalist teachings with those of Alma and Amulek.

PROGRESSIVE APPROACH TO INTERPRETATION

The theory of inspiration with which a reader approaches the revelations shapes the interpretation that follows. When the revelations and teachings of Joseph Smith are read as fossilized snapshots of a dynamic theology that was shared by a revelator whose understanding accumulated over time, it can result in an expanded view of redemption for the dead, as shown in the analysis above. The result, in this case, is a theology that points toward salvation and exaltation being open to almost everyone, even after death.

That was how many Church leaders who were contemporary with Smith understood the subject. Wilford Woodruff, for example, proclaimed, “There will be very few, if any, who will not accept the gospel. Jesus, while his body lay in the tomb, went and preached to the spirits in prison, who were destroyed in the days of Noah. After so long an imprisonment, in torment, they doubtless gladly embraced the gospel, and if so they will be saved in the kingdom of God.”⁵⁶ President Lorenzo Snow expressed a similar sentiment, stating that “the great bulk of those who are in the spirit world for whom the work has been done will receive the truth. The conditions for the spirits of the dead receiving the testimony of Jesus in the spirit world are a thousand times more favorable than they are here in this life.”⁵⁷ Preaching in the spirit world and proxy work for the dead were understood by Woodruff and Snow to allow salvation in the kingdom of God for the vast majority of God’s children.

One question about those statements is whether salvation in the kingdom of God is equivalent to exaltation in the celestial kingdom. In his most famous sermon in 1844, Joseph Smith taught that “when you climb a ladder you must begin at the bottom run[g] until you learn the last prin[ciple] of the Gospel for it is a great thing to learn Sal[vatio]n

Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, pp. 145, 149. See also Brown, *In Heaven as it is on Earth*, 219.

56. Wilford Woodruff, *The Discourses of Wilford Woodruff: Fourth President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, edited by G. Homer Durham (Bookcraft, 1969), 158.

57. Lorenzo Snow, “General Conference,” *Millennial Star* 55, no. 45 (November 6, 1893): 718, <https://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/digital/collection/MStar/id/19338>.

beyond the grave & it is not all to be com[prehended] in this world.”⁵⁸ This can be interpreted to mean that even the noblest and best human would have a significant amount of progress ahead of them after death before they were exalted. On another occasion, one woman recorded that Joseph Smith taught that “after death the spirit enters the lowest [heaven], and constantly progresses in spiritual knowledge until safely landed in the Celestial.”⁵⁹ If accurate, this statement represents a change from the limitations expressed in the 1832 vision, where those in the telestial kingdom cannot come to higher kingdoms, “worlds without end.”⁶⁰ Instead, nearly every human being could eventually be exalted to the celestial kingdom.

President Brigham Young provides an excellent example of an early Church leader who believed in repentance and progression towards exaltation after death:

If a person is baptized for the remission of sins, and dies in a short time thereafter, he is not prepared at once to enjoy a fulness of the glory promised to the faithful in the Gospel; for he must be schooled, while in the spirit, in the other departments of the house of God, passing on from truth to truth, from intelligence to intelligence, until he is prepared to again receive his body and to enter into the presence of the Father and the Son. We cannot enter into celestial glory in our present state of ignorance and mental darkness. . . .

Do not become disheartened, give up your labours, and conclude that you are not to be saved. All is yours, if you will but live according to what you know, and increase in knowledge and godliness. . . . Let every man faithfully stand to his post, and they will ultimately be worthy to enter into celestial glory. This is all the business we have on hand at present.⁶¹

On another occasion, he stated that those who initially “inherit another kingdom” instead of the celestial kingdom would “eventually have

58. “Discourse, 7 April 1844, as Reported by Thomas Bullock,” The Joseph Smith Papers, 17, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-7-april-1844-as-reported-by-thomas-bullock/4>.

59. Franklin Dewey Richards, “Words of the Prophets,” in Scriptural items, circa 1841–1844, Church History Catalog, Salt Lake City, UT (MS 4409); Charlotte Haven, March 26, 1843, “A Girl’s Letters from Nauvoo,” *The Overland Monthly* 16, no. 96 (December 1890): 626, <http://www.olivercowdery.com/smithhome/1880s-1890s/havn1890.htm>.

60. “Vision, 16 February 1832 [D&C 76],” The Joseph Smith Papers, 9, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/vision-16-february-1832-dc-76/9>. Compare Doctrine and Covenants 76:112.

61. Brigham Young, October 8, 1859, *Journal of Discourses*, 7:331–34.

the privilege of proving themselves worthy & advancing to a celestial kingdom but it would be a slow progress.”⁶² To Young, progression in the eternities was necessary since we do not die ready for exaltation.

As observed above, underlying assumptions about the nature of the revelations contribute to how salvation for the dead is interpreted. Young was very much in favor of the thought that living prophet receiving imperfect revelations that were collaborations of both human and divine elements. President Young bluntly stated on April 18, 1844, “[T]here has not yet been a perfect revelation given, because we cannot understand it, yet we receive a little here and a little there . . . because when God speake, he always speaks according to the capacity of the people.”⁶³ He even modeled this as he contemplated whether to communicate the inspiration he received as president of the Church in the form of revelation documents like the ones Joseph Smith recorded or to simply share them as impressions guiding him.⁶⁴

Also notable is that Young believed that later revelations represented more complete or currently relevant information. He recalled a time when Hyrum Smith had preached about the importance of the Bible, the Book of Mormon, and the Doctrine and Covenants. Young followed Smith in preaching: “I got up and I took the books (he had them on the stand). . . . ‘I would not give the ashes of a rye straw for these 3 books for the salvation of any man [that] lives.’ And that was my text, and I think before we got through that, the congregation was perfectly satisfied [that] if we had not living oracles in our midst, we had nothing to sectarian world.”⁶⁵ This approach—relying on the current prophet and more recent revelation

62. Wilford Woodruff, “Journal (January 1, 1854 – December 31, 1859),” *The Wilford Woodruff Papers*, 73, <https://wilfordwoodruffpapers.org/p/Z72>.

63. “Council of Fifty, Minutes, March 1844–January 1846; Volume 1, 10 March 1844–1 March 1845,” *The Joseph Smith Papers*, 171, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/council-of-fifty-minutes-march-1844-january-1846-volume-1-10-march-1844-1-march-1845/173>.

64. See Christopher James Blythe, “Brigham Young’s Newly Located February 1874 Revelation,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 58, no. 2 (2019): 171–75, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol58/iss2/6>.

65. Church History Department Pitman Shorthand transcriptions, 2013–2024; Parallel Column comparisons, 1866–1868, 1872, 1875, 1852–1854, 1859, 1863–1864; Brigham Young, 1852–1853, 1859, 1866–1868, 1863–1864, 1866; Brigham Young, October 8, 1866; Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/6f0406aa-22d8-4fb7-b49d-e80dc1a0a913/10/0>. See also Wilford Woodruff, January 27, 1860, “Journal (January

above previous revelations and scriptural texts—may have contributed to Young’s approach to ongoing progression in the afterlife despite the statement in the 1832 vision to the contrary.

This idea of progression from kingdom to kingdom also had currency among later Church leaders. For example, Elder B. H. Roberts wrote:

The question of advancement within the great divisions of glory celestial, terrestrial, and telestial; as also the question of advancement from one sphere of glory to another remains to be considered. In the revelation from which we have summarized what has been written here, in respect to the different degrees of glory [D&C 76], it is said that those of the terrestrial glory will be ministered unto by those of the celestial; and those of the telestial will be ministered unto by those of the terrestrial—that is, those of the higher glory minister to those of a lesser glory. We can conceive of no reason for all this administration of the higher to the lower, unless it be for the purpose of advancing our Father’s children along the lines of eternal progression.⁶⁶

While he admitted that any discussion of the topic was conjecture, Roberts himself felt that the vision put those, who did not receive the gospel in mortality (like Alvin Smith) into the terrestrial kingdom because “their development in spiritual knowledge and experience is not such as may warrant us in expecting that they are prepared to inherit the same degree of glory with those who have received the law of the gospel, faithfully observed all its requirements and through their obedience have become sanctified by it, and inherit the celestial glory.” He believed, however, that they would still have opportunity for progression: “I know of nothing that is written, however, which prevents us from believing that they may, eventually, enter the celestial kingdom.”⁶⁷

Again Elder Roberts’s belief in a wider scope of growth and progression in the afterlife may be connected to his understanding of the nature of revelatory texts. It was his conclusion that revelations were filtered through the minds of human beings, much as the dynamic theory of inspiration that Millard J. Erickson mentioned indicates:

The inspiration of God falls upon a prophet as a white ray of light may fall upon a prism, which separates the white ray into the various colored rays of

1, 1860 – October 22, 1865),” The Wilford Woodruff Papers, <https://wilfordwoodruffpapers.org/p/wj38>.

66. B. H. Roberts, *Outlines of Ecclesiastical History* (George Q. Cannon & Sons, 1893), 426–27.

67. B. H. Roberts, *The Gospel: An Exposition of its First Principles; and Man’s Relationship to Deity*, 3rd ed. (Deseret News, 1901), 35–36.

which it is composed—blue, orange, red, green, etc. . . . So with the white ray God's inspiration falling upon men. It receives different colorings or expressions through them according to their personal characteristics. While it is true that the inspiration of God may be so overwhelming in its force at times that the prophet may nigh lose his individuality, and become merely the mouthpiece of God, the organ through which the Divine speaks, yet the personality of the prophet is not usually so overwhelmed; hence each prophet preserves even under the inspiration of God his agency and his personal idiosyncrasies.⁶⁸

Roberts elaborated on this viewpoint while discussing the nature of revelations received through the Urim and Thummim: "In a direct revelation from the Lord, there is no imperfection, but where the Almighty uses a man as an instrument, the manner in which that revelation is imparted to may receive a certain human coloring from the prophet through whom it comes."⁶⁹ He explicitly rejected the idea that "the Lord is responsible . . . for the language of [the Book of Mormon because] . . . the words of the translation [were] read off through stone spectacles." His reasoning for doing so was that "I do not believe that the Lord is responsible for any defect of language that occurs here in the Book of Mormon, or any other revelation."⁷⁰ He added:

It should not be supposed . . . that this translation though accomplished by means of the "Interpreters" and "Seer Stone" . . . was merely a mechanical procedure; that no faith, or mental or spiritual effort was required on the prophet's part; that the instruments did all, while he who used them did nothing but look and repeat mechanically what he saw there reflected. . . . [Instead, it] required the utmost concentration of mental and spiritual force possessed by the Prophet, in order to exercise the gift of translation through the means of the sacred instruments provided for that work.⁷¹

As such, Roberts felt that "while Joseph Smith obtained the facts and ideas from the Nephite characters through the inspiration of God, he was left to express those facts and ideas, in the main, in such language as he could command."⁷² Thus, Roberts asserted that the seer stone was "by no means

68. B. H. Roberts, *New Witnesses for God*, 3 vols. (Deseret News, 1903–1908), 3:421–23.

69. B. H. Roberts, "Relation of Inspiration and Revelation to Church Government," *Improvement Era* 8, no. 5 (March 1905): 364–65.

70. Roberts, *New Witnesses for God*, 3:410–11.

71. Roberts, *New Witnesses for God*, 2:110–11.

72. B. H. Roberts, *Defense of the Faith and the Saints* (Deseret News: 1907), 1:271–73.

the principal factor in the work; its place must forever be regarded as secondary; it was an aid to the prophet, not he an aid to it.”⁷³ Likewise for the revelations, if the Lord had a looser control over the revelatory texts, then the revelations should reflect the knowledge and idiosyncrasies of the individual revelator.

CONCLUSION

Joseph Fielding Smith and Bruce R. McConkie represented a fundamentalist approach to Latter-day Saint theological interpretation of the scriptures. They embraced a version of plenary inspiration that led them to believe that the scriptures were superintended or dictated by God directly and that they would thus be consistent in the ideas they espoused. This led them to treat later revelations and prophetic teachings in the light of earlier scriptural works. For example, they expressed limitations to opportunities for salvation in the afterlife that proxy temple rituals opened up in order to sustain the words of Doctrine and Covenants 76 and Amulek’s teachings about the need to repent during this life. Latter-day Saint leaders who have expressed more openness to progressive revelation in connection with the limitations of the revelator—such as Brigham Young and B. H. Roberts—have tended to be less inclined to express hard limitations to progression after death. Thus, how one views the process of revelation and inspiration through which Joseph Smith Jr. worked has downstream implications for interpretation of theology, such as the extent to which the unbaptized dead (e.g., Alvin Smith) can be redeemed. And it is the opinion of this author that the latter perspective, shared by Young and Roberts, more accurately reflects the understanding of Joseph Smith himself as he experienced the revelations and visions now included in the Doctrine and Covenants.

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73. Roberts, *New Witnesses for God*, 3:423.



God Grants unto All Nations

by Robert L. Millet

Many years ago I addressed a group of faculty and students at a university in New England. It was a fifty-minute presentation on “The Christ of the Latter-day Saints.” Questions and answers followed. One faculty member raised his hand and then made a comment: “I do have a question for you,” he said, “but first let me say that I have great difficulty taking seriously any religious group that dismisses out of hand two thousand years of Christian history.” His words jolted me at the time, and they still do. It brought to mind a host of issues: Do Latter-day Saints in fact dismiss the whole of Christian history as “apostate”? Is such a position necessary in light of a belief in a restoration of the gospel? Is it the case that “the lights went out” in AD 100 and did not come on again until 1820?

Some years after that experience I was in Pasadena, California, with a Protestant colleague to conduct an interfaith program. We had completed our conversation (about ninety minutes) before a large group of people and then invited questions from the audience. The group consisted of about 60 percent Latter-day Saints and 40 percent Evangelicals. A Latter-day Saint missionary seated with his companion near the front of the chapel stood up and said: “My question is for Professor Millet. I simply want to clarify something. The Book of Mormon teaches that there are really only two churches—the church of the Lamb of God and the church of the devil [1 Ne. 14:10]. Now, to me that means that the

Latter-day Saints are the church of the Lamb, while all other people are a part of the church of the devil. Is that correct?" I tried to be sensitive, to respond in a way that wouldn't hurt feelings but would also correct what I believed to be a major misconception.

"ONLY TRUE CHURCH": WHAT IT DOES *NOT* MEAN

In the first section of the Doctrine and Covenants, a revelation given to Joseph Smith in November 1831, the Church of Christ is referred to as "the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth" (D&C 1:30). Admittedly, this is strong language, words that are offensive and even painful to persons of other faiths. Without question, it is a wedge that has been driven between Latter-day Saints and traditional Christians. It may be helpful to consider briefly what the phrase "only true and living church" means and what it does *not* mean. In what follows, I offer my own views, my own perspective. First, let's deal with what the phrase does *not* mean.

1. It does not mean that Latter-day Saints are the only true Christians.

We have no difficulty whatsoever accepting other persons' affirmations that they are Christian, that they acknowledge Jesus Christ as the divine Son of God, their Lord and Master. Nor do we believe that Latter-day Saints are the only ones entitled to divine guidance for their lives. C. S. Lewis put it well when he explained,

It is not for us to say who, in the deepest sense, is or is not close to the spirit of Christ. We do not see into men's hearts. We cannot judge and are indeed forbidden to judge. It would be wicked arrogance for us to say that any man is, or is not, a Christian. . . . When a man who accepts the Christian doctrine lives unworthily of [the name Christian], it is much clearer to say he is a bad Christian than to say he is not a Christian.¹

2. It does not mean that we believe that most of the doctrines in Catholic, Orthodox, or Protestant Christianity are false or that all of the leaders of the various world religions have improper motives.

Joseph Smith stated:

The inquiry is frequently made of me, "Wherein do you differ from others in your religious views?" In reality and essence we do not differ so far in our religious views, but that we could all drink into one principle of love. One of

1. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Touchstone, 1996), 10, 11.

the grand fundamental principles of “Mormonism” is to receive truth, let it come from whence it may.²

3. It does not mean that the Bible has been so corrupted that it cannot be relied upon to teach us sound doctrine and to provide an example of how to live.

President M. Russell Ballard, in speaking of “the miracle of the Holy Bible,” observed, “It is a miracle that the Bible literally contains within its pages the converting, healing Spirit of Christ, which has turned men’s hearts for centuries, leading them to pray, to choose right paths, and to search to find their Savior.” Further, “It is not by chance or coincidence that we have the Bible today. Righteous individuals were prompted by the Spirit to record both the sacred things they saw and the inspired words they heard and spoke. Other devoted people were prompted to protect and preserve these records.”³ While Latter-day Saints do not subscribe to a doctrine of scriptural inerrancy, we do believe that the hand of God has been over the preservation of the biblical materials such that what we have now is what the Almighty would have us possess. In the words of Elder Bruce R. McConkie to religious educators, “We cannot avoid the conclusion that a divine providence is directing all things as they should be. This means that the Bible, as it now is, contains that portion of the Lord’s word” that the present world “is entitled and able to receive.”⁴

While Latter-day Saints do not believe that one can derive divine authority to perform the saving ordinances or sacraments from the scriptures, we do say that the Bible (1) teaches of groups of people in the past who enjoyed the full blessings of the everlasting gospel and (2) teaches (especially in the New Testament) the good news or glad tidings of redemption in and through the atoning grace of Jesus Christ (see 3 Ne. 27:13–21; D&C 76:40–42).

2. Joseph Smith, Journal, July 9, 1843; Historian’s Office, JS History, Draft Notes, July 9, 1843. See also Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph* (BYU Religious Studies Center, 1980), 229.

3. *Conference Report*, April 2007, 78–79.

4. “The Bible: A Sealed Book,” Eighth Annual Church Educational System Religious Educators’ Symposium, August 1984, in *Doctrines of the Restoration: Sermons & Writings of Bruce R. McConkie* (Bookcraft, 1989), 280.

4. It does not mean that God disapproves of or rejects all that devoted seekers after truth are teaching or doing, where their heart is, and what they hope to accomplish in the religious world.

“God, the Father of us all,” President Ezra Taft Benson said, “uses the men of the earth, especially good men, to accomplish his purposes. It has been true in the past, it is true today, it will be true in the future.” President Benson then quoted the following from a conference address delivered by Elder Orson F. Whitney in 1928: “Perhaps the Lord needs such men on the outside of His Church to help it along. They are among its auxiliaries, and can do more good for the cause where the Lord has placed them, than anywhere else.” Now, note this particularly poignant message: “*God is using more than one people for the accomplishment of His great and marvelous work. The Latter-day Saints cannot do it all.* It is too vast, too arduous for any one people.” Elder Whitney then pointed out that we have no warfare with other churches. “They are our partners in a certain sense.”⁵

In June of 1829, Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer were instructed, “Contend against no church, save it be the church of the devil” (D&C 18:20). Elder B. H. Roberts offered this insightful commentary on this passage:

I understand the injunction to Oliver Cowdery to “contend against no church, save it be the church of the devil” . . . to mean that he shall contend against evil, against untruth, against all combinations of wicked men. They constitute the church of the devil, the kingdom of evil, a federation of unrighteousness; and the servants of God have a right to contend against that which is evil, let it appear where it will. . . . [O]ur relationship to the religious world is not one that calls for the denunciation of sectarian churches as composing the church of the devil.

All that makes for untruth, for unrighteousness constitutes the kingdom of evil—the church of the devil. All that makes for truth, for righteousness, is of God; it constitutes the kingdom of righteousness—the empire of Jehovah; and, in a certain sense at least, constitutes the Church of Christ. With . . . the kingdom of righteousness we have no warfare. On the contrary, both the spirit of the Lord’s commandments to His servants and the dictates of right reason would suggest that we seek to enlarge this kingdom of righteousness both by recognizing such truths as it possesses and seeking the friendship and cooperation of the righteous men and women who constitute its membership.⁶

5. Ezra Taft Benson, in *Conference Report*, April 1972, 49, cited by Orson F. Whitney, *Conference Report*, April 1928, 59 (emphasis added).

6. *Conference Report*, April 1906, 14–15.

WHAT IT *DOES* MEAN

What, then, does the revelation mean when it states that the restored Church is “the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth”?

1. “The word *only*,” Elder Neal A. Maxwell has written, “asserts a uniqueness and singularity” about the Church “as the exclusive ecclesiastical, authority-bearing agent for our Father in heaven in this dispensation.”

“When the Lord used the designation *true*,” Elder Maxwell pointed out,

he implied that the doctrines of the Church and its authority are not just partially true, but true as measured by divine standards. The Church is not, therefore, conceptually compromised by having been made up from doctrinal debris left over from another age, nor is it comprised of mere fragments of the true faith. It is based upon the *fulness* of the gospel of him whose *name* it bears, thus passing the two tests for proving his church that were given by Jesus during his visit to the Nephites (3 Ne. 27:8).

When the word *living* is used it carries a divinely deliberate connotation. The Church is neither dead nor dying, nor is it even wounded. The Church, like the living God who established it, is alive, aware, and functioning. It is not a museum that houses a fossilized faith; rather, it is a kinetic kingdom characterized by living faith in living disciples.⁷

Living things react, respond, adjust, and change. Recent developments within the restored Church—whether curricula, structure and length of meetings, and temple language—certainly attest to the fact that change is an ongoing part of a living faith and is a way of life.

2. “In the only true and living church,” doctrinal finality must rest with apostles and prophets.

One New Testament professor at an Evangelical Christian seminary remarked: “You know, Bob, one of the things I love about my way of life as a religious scholar is that no one is looking over my shoulder to check my doctrine and analyze whether I’m teaching the truth. Because in my faith there is no organizational hierarchy to which I must answer, I am free to write and declare whatever I choose.” I nodded kindly and chose not to respond at the time.

7. Neal A. Maxwell, *Things as They Really Are* (Deseret Book, 1978), 45–46 (emphasis in original).

I have thought since then, however, that what my friend perceives to be a liberating academic freedom can become license to interpret, intuit, or exegete a scriptural passage in a myriad of ways, resulting in interpretations as diverse as the backgrounds, training, and proclivities of the persons involved. There are simply too many ambiguous sections of scripture to let the Bible, as some say, “speak for itself.” This was, in fact, young Joseph Smith’s dilemma: “The teachers of religion of the different sects,” he explained, “understood the same passages of scripture so differently as to destroy all confidence in settling [his religious questions] by an appeal to the Bible” (JS—H 1:12).

“At some level,” Richard Bushman has suggested,

Joseph’s revelations indicate a loss of trust in the Christian ministry. For all their learning and their eloquence, *the clergy could not be trusted with the Bible. They did not understand what the book meant.* It was a record of revelations, and *the ministry had turned it into a handbook. The Bible had become a text to be interpreted rather than an experience to be lived.* In the process, the power of the book was lost.⁸

In writing of *sola scriptura* as a tenet of the Reformation, American religious historian Randall Balmer observed that

Luther’s sentiments created a demand for Scriptures in the vernacular, and Protestants ever since have stubbornly insisted on interpreting the Bible for themselves, forgetting most of the time that they come to the text with their own set of cultural biases and personal agendas.

“Underlying this insistence on individual interpretation,” Balmer continues,

is the assumption . . . that the plainest, most evident reading of the text is the proper one. Everyone becomes his or her own theologian. There is no longer any need to consult Augustine or Thomas Aquinas or Martin Luther about their understanding of various passages when you yourself are the final arbiter of what is the correct reading. This tendency, together with the absence of any authority structure within Protestantism, has created a kind of theological free-for-all, as various individuals or groups insist that *their* reading of the Bible is the only possible interpretation.⁹

8. Richard L. Bushman “A Joseph Smith for the Twenty-First Century,” *Brigham Young University Studies* 40, no. 3 (2001): 167–68; see also Richard L. Bushman, *Believing History: Latter-day Saint Essays*, edited by Reid L. Neilson and Jed Woodworth (Columbia University Press, 2004), 274.

9. Randall Balmer, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, 3rd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2000), 24.

THE “MORE” OF THE RESTORED CHURCH

Latter-day Saints should really not be singled out as being exclusionary or even arrogant because of our belief in the “only true church.” Is this not the same position taken by the Roman Catholic Church? Doesn’t denomination A believe they have a better insight into this or that doctrine than churches B, C, and D? Doesn’t this group or movement feel strongly that their beliefs and practices more closely mirror those of the church established by Jesus in the first century? Weren’t Hus and Luther and Calvin and Zwingli and Wesley convinced that their efforts to reform the mother church or spiritually enliven the Church of England, inspired and heaven-directed, that their reforms and teachings brought them closer to what the Master had intended from the beginning?

Our God is the God of all creation: an infinite, eternal, and omni-loving Being who will do all that He can to lead and direct, to bring greater light into the lives of His children, to save as many as will be saved. He is the only true God and thus the only living Deity who can hear and respond to the earnest petitions of His children. He is the God of the Roman Catholics, the Eastern Orthodox, the Protestants, and all those who seek to know, to love, and to offer praise and adoration to the true and living God. I have been a Latter-day Saint all my life, but I do not in any way believe the Almighty loves Latter-day Saints any more than He loves Anglicans, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Adventists, Unitarians, Jews, Muslims, or atheists. He loves us all and is pleased with any and every halting effort on our part to learn of Him, serve Him, and be true to His light within us.

Well then, are the Latter-day Saints universalists? No, not if that means that all men and women will eventually be saved in the highest heaven. No, in that we believe, with our Christian brothers and sisters, that salvation is in Christ and in him alone. That is, no man or woman will inherit the highest glory hereafter who does not accept Jesus as the Christ, the Savior and Redeemer, including his gospel, with its requisite covenants and ordinances. We do, however, believe that all except the sons of perdition will receive salvation in a kingdom of glory hereafter. In describing the revolutionary nature of the Vision of the Glories (D&C 76), Richard L. Bushman pointed out, “The most radical departure of ‘the Vision’ was not the tripartite heaven but the contraction of hell. . . . The doctrine recast life after death.” In this Vision, “A permanent hell threatened

very few [the sons of perdition]. The question was not escape from hell but closeness to God. God scaled the rewards to each person's capacity."¹⁰

What troubles Nicene or traditional Christians most about The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is not our focus on family, our health code, or our style and standard of living. Rather, it is what a Christian friend of mine calls "the extra stuff," what I call our "value added"—our distinctive offering to the Christian world. In the words of Brigham Young,

We, the Latter-day Saints, take the liberty of believing more than our Christian brethren: we not only believe . . . the Bible, but . . . the whole of the plan of salvation that Jesus has given to us. Do we differ from others who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ? No, only in believing more.¹¹

BOLDNESS, GENTLENESS, AND RESPECT

Is it the case that "the lights went completely out" in AD 100 and did not come on again until 1820, some seventeen centuries later? President John Taylor explained that there were persons during medieval times who

could commune with God, and who, by the power of faith, could draw aside the curtain of eternity and gaze upon the invisible world . . . gaze upon the face of God, have the ministering of angels, and unfold the future destinies of the world. If those were dark ages I pray God to give me a little darkness, and deliver me from the light and intelligence that prevail in our day.¹²

Latter-day Saints cannot in good conscience ignore what we believe to be the language of the Lord to Joseph Smith in the Sacred Grove (JS—H 1:19), or in modern revelation (D&C 1:30), in order to avoid offending those of other faiths. We cannot relinquish the reason we have for being. "Could we not use the words *better* or *best*" in speaking of our Church's position in the religious world, President Boyd K. Packer asked.

The word *only* really isn't the most appealing way to begin a discussion of the gospel. If we thought only in terms of diplomacy or popularity, surely we should change our course. But we must hold tightly to it even though some turn away.

10. Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith, Rough Stone Rolling: A Cultural Biography of Mormonism's Founder* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 199.

11. Brigham Young, July 18, 1869, *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (LDS Booksellers Depot, 1854–86), 13:56.

12. John Taylor, September 7, 1873, *Journal of Discourses*, 16:197.

President Packer continued by observing:

We know there are decent, respectable, humble people in many churches, Christian and otherwise. In turn, sadly enough, there are so-called Latter-day Saints who by comparison are not as worthy, for they do not keep their covenants. But it is not a matter of comparing individuals. We are not baptized collectively, nor will we be judged collectively. . . . Yield on this doctrine [of the “only true church”], and you cannot justify the Restoration. The doctrine is true; it is logical. The opposite is not.¹³

A modern revelation instructs us that “of him unto whom much is given much is required” (D&C 82:3). We have indeed received much, and it is thus required of us to make known to the world the singular status of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. And yet surely there is a way to do so with gentleness and respect for our brothers and sisters of other faiths. The Apostle Peter instructed the Saints to “sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear” (1 Pet. 3:15). Respected New Testament scholar N. T. Wright rendered this passage as follows: “Sanctify the Messiah as Lord in your hearts, and always be ready to make a reply to anyone who asks you to explain the hope that is in you. Do it, though, *with gentleness and respect*” (The Kingdom New Testament, 475; emphasis added).

President Gordon B. Hinckley remarked:

The Lord said that this is the only true and living Church upon the face of the earth with which He is well-pleased. I didn’t say that. Those are His words. The Prophet Joseph was told that the other sects were wrong. Those are not my words. Those are the Lord’s words. But *they are hard words for those of other faiths. We don’t need to exploit them.* We just need to be kind and good and gracious people to others, showing by our example the great truth of that which we believe.¹⁴

UNTO ALL NATIONS

I am fully persuaded that Jesus Christ, who is the embodiment of love and mercy and every godly attribute in perfection, will do all that is appropriate to inspire, lift, edify, and encourage individuals, families, communities, and whole nations. It was to Nephi that Jehovah spoke on this

13. Boyd K. Packer, “The Only True Church,” *Ensign*, November 1985 (emphasis in original).

14. Gordon B. Hinckley, Regional Conference, North Ogden, Utah, May 3, 1998, cited in *Church News*, June 3, 2000 (emphasis added).

matter: “Know ye not that there are more nations than one? Know ye not that I, the Lord your God, have created all men, and that I remember those who are upon the isles of the sea; and that I rule in the heavens above and in the earth beneath; and that *I bring forth my word unto the children of men, yea, even upon all the nations of the earth?* . . . For behold, I shall speak unto the Jews and they shall write it; and I shall also speak unto the Nephites and they shall write it; and I shall also speak unto the other tribes of the house of Israel, which I have led away, and they shall write it; *and I shall also speak unto all nations of the earth and they shall write it.*” (2 Ne. 29:7, 12; emphasis added.)

Alma explained that “the Lord doth grant unto all nations, of their own nation and tongue, to teach his word, yea, in wisdom, all that he seeth fit that they should have” (Alma 29:8). Elder B. H. Roberts offered the following expansive insight:

While the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is established for the instruction of men; and is one of God’s instrumentalities for making known the truth, yet [God] is not limited to that institution for such purposes, neither in time nor place. God raises up wise men . . . of their own tongue and nationality, speaking to them through means that they can comprehend . . . but always giving that measure of truth that the people are prepared to receive. Mormonism holds, then, that all the great teachers are servants of God, among all nations and in all ages. They are inspired men, appointed to instruct God’s children according to the conditions in the midst of which he finds them.

Brother Roberts continues:

Wherever God finds a soul sufficiently enlightened and pure, one with whom his Spirit can communicate, lo! he makes of him a teacher of men. . . . While the path of sensuality and darkness may be that which most men tread, a few . . . have been led along the upward path; a few in all countries and generations have been wisdom seekers, or seekers of God. They have been so because the Divine Word of Wisdom has looked upon them, choosing them for the knowledge and service of himself. . . . While it is . . . taught by the very revelations of God themselves, that there is but one man . . . who is entitled to receive revelations for the government and guidance for the Church. . . still it is nowhere held that this man is the only instrumentality through which God may communicate his mind and will to the world.¹⁵

15. B. H. Roberts, *Defense of the Faith and the Saints*, 2 vols. (Deseret News, 1907), 1:512–13; see also B. H. Roberts, *Defense of the Faith and the Saints* (Maasai Publishing, 2002), 335–36.

In 1978, the First Presidency (Spencer W. Kimball, N. Eldon Tanner, and Marion G. Romney) called upon the Saints to broaden their perspectives relative to our brothers and sisters of other faiths, and particularly to their leaders. The First Presidency issued an official statement, a portion of which reads:

The great religious leaders of the world such as Mohammed, Confucius, and the Reformers, as well as philosophers including Socrates, Plato, and others, received a portion of God's light. Moral truths were given to them by God to enlighten whole nations and to bring a higher level of understanding to individuals.¹⁶

It is but reasonable, therefore, that elements of truth, pieces of a much larger mosaic, should be found throughout the world in varying cultures and among diverse religious groups. Further, as the world has passed through phases of apostasy and restoration, relics of revealed doctrine remain, albeit in some cases in altered or even convoluted forms. Persons lacking spiritual insight and the faith that derives from a knowledge of Christ's eternal plan of salvation may tend to cast doubt on the true gospel, may point to legends and traditions of creation epics or flood stories that presumably predate the Pentateuch, may eagerly note similarities between ordinances of the temple and practices in pagan cultures, and may thereby suggest that Christianity has but copied from the more ancient sources.

Joseph F. Smith, a nephew of the Prophet Joseph Smith, had much to say to those who seek to upstage Christianity. The Savior, he taught, "being the fountain of truth, is no imitator. He taught the truth first; it was his before it was given to man." Further,

Let it be remembered that Christ was with the Father from the beginning, that the gospel of truth and light existed from the beginning, and is from everlasting to everlasting. The Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, as one God, are the fountain of truth. . . . If we find truth in broken fragments through the ages, it may be set down as an incontrovertible fact that it originated at the fountain, and was given to philosophers, inventors, patriots, reformers, and prophets by the inspiration of God. It came from him through his Son Jesus Christ and the Holy Ghost, in the first place, and from no other source. It is eternal.

In summary, President Smith pointed out, "Men are mere repeaters of what he has taught them. He has voiced no thought originating with man."¹⁷

16. The First Presidency, "God's Love for All Mankind," The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, February 15, 1978.

17. Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine* (Deseret Book, 1971), 31, 395, 398–400; see also Joseph F. Smith, February 9, 1873, *Journal of Discourses*, 15:325.

REMNANTS OF THE FAITH

Knowing what we know concerning God our Father—that He is a personal being, that He has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as our own, that He is an exalted and gloried being, and knowing that such understanding was had by many of the ancients—should we be surprised to find legends and myths concerning gods who have divine power but human attributes and passions? Knowing that Adam and Seth and Enos and Cainan and Mahalaleel and others of the antediluvians spoke of the coming of the Messiah, and that the Messiah would come to earth as a man but be possessed of the powers of a God, is it not likely that they also knew that he would be born of a virgin? Should we be surprised to find pagan traditions of virgin births and divine humans?

Adam heard the heavenly voice saying: “I am God; I made the world, and *men before they were in the flesh*” (Moses 6:51). That is, men and women in the earliest ages knew of a first estate, a premortal existence. Therefore, is it any wonder that several religious traditions are wedded to an idea of past lives? Inasmuch as the doctrines of rebirth, regeneration, resurrection, and the immortality of the soul were taught to Adam and his posterity, why should we flinch when we discover the misshapen doctrines of reincarnation or transmigration of souls in such traditions as Hinduism, Jainism, and Sikhism, or when we encounter a people like the ancient Egyptians, who were almost obsessed not with death (as some suppose) but with life after death?

Of particular interest to Latter-day Saints is the resemblance between what goes on in our own temples and things that transpire in the sacred structures of other faiths. In many cases those resemblances may originate with earnest truth seekers who act without authority, even as did Pharaoh, great-grandson of Noah. Pharaoh, “being a righteous man, established his kingdom and judged his people wisely and justly all his days, seeking earnestly to imitate that order established by the fathers in the first generations, in the days of the first patriarchal reign, even in the reign of Adam, and also of Noah, his father” (Abr. 1:26–27).

Professor Hugh Nibley spent a lifetime studying such parallels. He wrote:

Latter-day Saints believe that their temple ordinances are as old as the human race and represent a primordial revealed religion that has passed through alternate phases of apostasy and restoration which have left the world littered with the scattered fragments of the original structure, some more and some less recognizable, but all badly damaged and out of proper context.

More specifically, Nibley asked,

But what about the Egyptian rites? What are they to us? They are a parody, an imitation, but as such not to be despised. For all the great age and consistency of their rites and teachings, which certainly command respect, the Egyptians did not have the real thing, and they knew it. . . .

The [Latter-day Saint temple] endowment . . . is frankly a model, a presentation in figurative terms. As such it is flexible and adjustable; for example, it may be presented in more languages than one and in more than one medium of communication. But since it does not attempt to be a picture of reality, but only a model or analog to show how things work, setting forth the pattern of man's life on earth with its fundamental whys and wherefores, it does not need to be changed or adapted greatly through the years; it is a remarkably stable model, which makes its comparison with other forms and traditions, including the more ancient ones, quite valid and instructive.¹⁸

And what is true of sacred practices and beliefs throughout the ancient non-Christian world is also true in today's modern Christian world. We believe that divine priesthood authority was withdrawn by God and that many plain and precious truths were taken away or kept back following the deaths of the meridian apostles (1 Ne. 13:20–40). This does not mean, however, that Protestants or Catholics have no truth or that any scriptural interpretation from them is automatically suspect, incorrect, or corrupt. As noted earlier, elements of enlightenment, remnants of truth, and aspects of the faith of the Former-day Saints may be found in modern Christianity. The Lord loves His children, all of them, and He delights to “honor those who serve [him] in righteousness and in truth unto the end” (D&C 76:5). “Have the Presbyterians any truth?” Joseph the Prophet asked in 1843. “Yes. Have the Baptists, Methodists, etc., any truth? Yes. They all have a little truth mixed with error. We should gather all the good and true principles in the world and treasure them up, or we shall not come out true ‘Mormons.’”¹⁹

CONCLUSION

Everyone has access to some measure of light and truth from the Almighty, what Latter-day Saints know as the Light of Christ or Spirit

18. Hugh Nibley, *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Egyptian Endowment* (Deseret Book, 1975), xii–xiii.

19. Joseph Smith, Journal, July 23, 1843; “Discourse by President Joseph Smith, Sunday July 23rd 1843,” Joseph Smith Collection, Church History Library; see also Ehat and Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 234.

of Jesus Christ (D&C 84:44–48, 88:6–13; Moroni 7:12–19). This is similar if not the same as what the Protestant or Catholic world calls “general revelation,” and the fruits and divine assistance that flow from this light “common grace.” President Brigham Young thus declared that there has never been “a man or woman upon the face of the earth, from the days of Adam to this day, who has not been enlightened, instructed, and taught by the revelations of Jesus Christ.”²⁰

On another occasion President Young pointed out that God “gives his Spirit when and to whom he pleases. . . . I never passed John Wesley’s church in London without stopping to look at it. Was he a good man? Yes; I suppose him to have been, by all accounts, as good as ever walked on this earth, according to his knowledge.” And then, speaking of Wesley in the postmortal spirit world, Brother Brigham asked: “Has he obtained a rest? Yes, and greater than ever entered his mind to expect; and so have thousands of others of the various religious denominations.”²¹ The prophets teach that if people will be true to the light and understanding they have, they will be led to greater and higher light, both here and hereafter. “And the Spirit giveth light to every man that cometh into the world; and the Spirit enlighteneth every man through the world, that hearkeneth to the voice of the Spirit” (D&C 84:46–48).²²

The longer I live and the more God-fearing people I encounter, the more clearly I see God working through noble people throughout the earth. Professor Richard J. Mouw, a valued friend and colleague, former president of Fuller Theological Seminary, and a very devout Calvinist, wrote:

[W]hile I am no universalist, my own inclination is to emphasize the “wide-ness of God’s mercy” rather than the “small number of the elect” motif that has often dominated the Calvinist outlook. I take seriously the Bible’s vision of the final gathering-in of the elect, of that “great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages,” who shout the victory cry, “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb” (Revelation 7:9–10).

Now note these words:

For all I know—and for all any of us can know—*much of what we now think of as common grace may in the end time be revealed to be saving grace.* But in

20. Brigham Young, December 3, 1854, *Journal of Discourses*, 2:139.

21. Brigham Young, July 3, 1859, *Journal of Discourses*, 7:5.

22. See Smith, *Gospel Doctrine*, 67–68; Bruce R. McConkie, *A New Witness for the Articles of Faith* (Deseret Book, 1985), 260–61.

the meantime, we are obligated to serve the Lord in accordance to patterns he has made clear to us.²³

Gaining a broader perspective on God's tender regard for all His children has changed my life. After three decades of interfaith endeavors; after reading scores of books and articles to better understand colleagues and associates of both Christian and non-Christian denominations; after having spent hundreds of hours in intensive, probing conversations on doctrinal matters from Adam to Zion—after all this, I have never been more committed to the restored Church than I am right now. The fruits of the Restoration have never been sweeter to my taste. At the same time, I have felt a deeper sense of love, admiration, and respect for marvelous women and men whose beliefs are somewhat different than mine, but whose desire to seek out truth and gain deeper understanding has been akin to mine.

In addition, I have been blessed to see and experience the love of God for all of His children; I have come to sense, more than ever before, that the Almighty is working through men and women of various religious persuasions to bring to pass the marvelous work and a wonder foreseen by Isaiah. I cannot count the number of times that in bringing to a close our two-day discussions, and while listening to dear friends offering their closing remarks, I have felt the reality of the Savior's words to his apostles that "where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matt. 18:20).

The Prophet Joseph Smith demonstrated his elevated prophetic perspective, coupled with his breadth of soul, when he asked: "If I esteem mankind to be in error, shall I bear them down? No. I will lift them up, and in their own way too, if I cannot persuade them my way is better; and I will not seek to compel any man to believe as I do, only by the force of reasoning, for truth will cut its own way."²⁴

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23. Richard J. Mouw, *He Shines in All That's Fair: Culture and Common Grace* (Eerdmans, 2001), 100 (emphasis added).

24. Joseph Smith, Journal, July 9, 1843; Historian's Office, JS History, Draft Notes, July 9, 1843.



“I Shall also Speak unto All Nations of the Earth and They Shall Write It”: Toward a Mormon Theology of Religions

by James McLachlan

Some years ago, I spent a year at the Claremont School of Theology and sat in a class on religious pluralism with David Griffin. I had come to know David while working with him on a dialogue on Mormonism and process theology that became part of David L. Paulsen and Donald W. Musser’s 2008 book on Mormonism and twentieth century theology.¹ Coming from a personalist, romantic, and existentialist philosophical background, the idea of religious commitment had a relation to romantic notions of love and marriage. Marriage, faithfulness, and fidelity seemed the best analogy for commitment to one’s religious tradition. Indeed, this is the analogy used throughout the prophets in the Hebrew Bible. I came to see exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism in marital terms like whoring, polygamy, and friendship. I favored the kind of “deep religious pluralism.”² I used the metaphor of friendship with other religions and humble devotion to one’s own as the right metaphor for how Mormons should think of other religions. Though I still find the marital analogy compelling, Jews and Christians have always loved the

1. David Griffin and James McLachlan, “A Dialogue on Process Theology,” in *Mormonism in Dialogue with Contemporary Christian Theologies*, edited by Donald Musser and David Paulsen (Mercer University Press, 2007), 161–210.

2. David Ray Griffin, ed., *Deep Religious Pluralism* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2005).

Song of Songs, Akiva called it the “holy of holies,”³ and Bernard of Clairvaux wrote a massive commentary on it and mystical marriage.⁴ Recently, I have started to rethink the question. Paul Knitter both used the marriage analogy and called it into question in his recent *Without Buddha I Could not be a Christian*.⁵

In its previous incarnation, my view was basically that the last forty years’ discussions of the plurality of religions have centered around three possible stances toward another’s religion.⁶ The exclusivist claims that his or her tradition is the only true one and that all others are wrong. For example, a Christian might claim that his tradition offers the only path to salvation.⁷ An exclusivist would investigate other traditions only to show how they were wrong, for mere intellectual curiosity, or as Augustine claimed of the pagan, for “splendid vices.” Sincere religious interest would constitute whoring after false gods. An inclusivist claims that all religions are really versions of one’s own, which is the true faith. The Catholic theologian Karl Rahner argued that salvation was available through other traditions because the God who is revealed fully in Christ is also available in other traditions. Thus Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Jews, atheists, etc. may be, depending on the quality of their lives, anonymous Christians.⁸ Here we have a type of religious polygamy in which all the traditions become one’s own. Finally, a pluralist claims that all religions are somehow true and thus equally valid ways to salvation.⁹ Hence, religions should

3. The full quote is, “While all of the sacred writings are holy, the Song of Songs is the holy of holies!” Mishnah, Yadayim 3:5, cited in Roland Kenneth Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Eerdmans, 1969), 1051.

4. St. Bernard of Clairvaux, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, cited in Stephen Katz, ed., *Comparative Mysticism: An Anthology of Original Sources* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 208–10.

5. Paul Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could not Be a Christian* (Oneworld Publications, 2009).

6. Alan Race, *Christian and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in Christian Theology of Religions* (Orbis Books, 1983).

7. Alvin Plantinga, “Pluralism: A Defense of Religious Exclusivism,” in *The Rationality of Belief and the Plurality of Faith*, edited by T. D. Senor (Columbia University Press, 1995), 191–215.

8. Karl Rahner, “Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions,” *Theological Investigations*, vol. 5, in *Christianity and Other Religions*, edited by John Hick and Brian Hebblewaite (Fortress Press, 1980).

9. “Salvation” is a Christian term, revealing that a good deal of this discussion of pluralism has been carried on by Christian theologians.

enter into a dialogue of equals. They are examples of transcendent truth(s) beyond the finite expression of any one faith. The pluralist view has taken on a variety of incarnations. Most well-known has been the position taken by John Dunne, Frithjof Schuon, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, and especially John Hick.¹⁰ Proponents of this position hold that all religions are equally valid ways to the same truth. This one truth is Hick's famous "*an sich*" that is beyond representation. But true to the very notion of pluralism there are a plurality of pluralists. Here, we seem to have a group of friends on holiday, each taking a different path up the same mountain—only to be surprised when they meet at the top. Robert Neville gives a metaphysically rigorous defense of this position in his description of the original creative act, which he clearly states is impersonal.¹¹

Writers like Mark David Heim, John Cobb, David Griffin, and our friend Andrew Schwartz have challenged this position.¹² On this view, different religions may even represent different truths. The difficulty all three find with Hick's position is that it favors, despite Hick's protestations to the contrary, an impersonal conception of the ultimate (Hick's *an sich*) over any personal ultimate and is thus not truly a pluralism because it

10. John S. Dunne, *The Way of All the Earth* (Notre Dame University Press, 1972); Frithjof Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (The Theosophical Publishing House, 1984); Wilfred Cantwell Smith, "Theology and the World's Religious History," in *Toward a Universal Theology of Religions*, edited by Leonard Swidler (Orbis Books, 1987); John Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions: The Rainbow of Faiths* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1995); John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (Yale University Press, 1989).

11. Robert Cummings Neville, *Ultimates: Philosophical Theology*, vol I (State University of New York Press, 2013), 227–50.

12. S. Mark Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (Orbis Books, 1999); John Cobb, *Christ in a Pluralistic Age* (The Westminster Press, 1975); John Cobb, "Some Whiteheadian Assumptions About Religion and Pluralism" in *Deep Religious Pluralism*, edited by David Ray Griffin (Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 243–62; John Cobb, *Transforming Christianity and the World: A Way Beyond Absolutism and Relativism*, edited by Paul F. Knitter (Orbis Books, 1999); David Ray Griffin, "Religious Pluralism: Generic, Identist, and Deep," in *Deep Religious Pluralism*, edited by David Ray Griffin (Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 39–66; Andrew Schwartz and John Cobb Jr., "All Worship the Same God: Religious Pluralist View," in *Do Christians, Muslims, and Jews Worship the Same God? Four Views*, edited by Ronnie P. Campbell and Christopher Gnanakan (Zondervan Academic, 2019), 23–65.

sees religious traditions that favor a personal ultimate as not fully realized. David Griffin called this identist pluralism. "According to identist pluralism, all religions are oriented toward the same religious object (whether it be called 'God,' 'Brahman,' 'Nirvana,' 'Sunyata,' 'Ultimate Reality,' 'the Transcendent,' or 'the Real') and promote essentially the same end."¹³ In what they term deep religious pluralism, John Cobb, David Griffin, and Andrew Schwartz have argued that it could be that religions seek different ends. There is not one mountain, "religions promote different ends—different salvations—perhaps by virtue of being oriented toward different religious objects, perhaps thought of as different ultimates. Differential pluralism is, in other words, pluralistic soteriologically and perhaps also ontologically."¹⁴ Stephen Prothero and a small army of others take a similar position. The different religions are playing different games. For example, Christians are playing the salvation game and Buddhists are playing the liberation game. It makes no more sense to say that Buddhists are inadequate when it comes to salvation than to say the Padres score fewer touchdowns than the Chargers.

MORMONS ARE INCLUSIVISTS? WELL SORT OF

At first glance, Mormons appear to be exclusivists. Are they not, as it says in D&C 1:30, "the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth"? But the exclusivist label vanishes fairly early if one moves beyond this verse to LDS statements over the years. Brigham Young voiced an inclusivist approach on many occasions. One great example is that Mormonism is actively seeking truth all over. That all truth wherever it is, is Mormonism.

"Mormonism," so called, embraces every principle pertaining to life and salvation, for time and eternity. No matter who has it. If the infidel has got truth it belongs to "Mormonism." The truth and sound doctrine possessed by the sectarian world, and they have a great deal, all belong to this Church. As for their morality, many of them are, morally, just as good as we are. All that is good, lovely, and praiseworthy belongs to this Church and Kingdom. "Mormonism" includes all truth. There is no truth but what belongs to the Gospel. It is life, eternal life; it is bliss; it is the fulness of all things in the gods and in the eternities of the gods.¹⁵

13. Griffin, "Religious Pluralism," 23.

14. Griffin.

15. Brigham Young, April 8, 1867, *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1854–86), 11:375.

This kind of inclusivist position seems to be the position of the present-day Church. On February 15, 1978, the First Presidency of the Church issued the following declaration:

The great religious leaders of the world such as Mohammed, Confucius, and the Reformers, as well as philosophers including Socrates, Plato, and others, received a portion of God's light. Moral truths were given to them by God to enlighten whole nations and to bring a higher level of understanding to individuals. . . . Our message therefore is one of special love and concern for the eternal Welfare of all men and women, regardless of religious belief, race, or nationality, knowing that we are truly brothers and sisters because we are sons and daughters of the same Eternal Father.¹⁶

What is voiced in these passages is a claim to a fullness of truth, but also the admission that God has revealed at least some of that truth to others. But do you have to read these passages as necessarily inclusivist? This is one of the limitations of the marital metaphor. As Paul Knitter notes, despite the beautiful scriptural metaphors, being faithful to my religion is in some ways unlike being faithful to my spouse or lover.

Being faithful to a creed may really miss ways that I could appreciate and understand the beloved more clearly.¹⁷ For example, reading Marjorie Suchocki and other feminist thinkers has helped me see my beloved more clearly. Creeds are ideas and doctrines, not persons. In addition, as Cobb and Schwartz point out, "even then interpretations of creedal affirmations vary greatly. Using doctrine to identify 'Christians' is problematic."¹⁸

Think of this in relation to Young's statement that all that is true is Mormonism. On the face of it, such statements can be seen as inclusivist or pluralist. I'm finding truth everywhere. Consider what Terryl Givens says about Joseph Smith being someone who absorbed ideas from all around: "If there was one prevailing sense in which Joseph Smith was a child of his age, it was in the avidity with which he reflected this dynamic, fundamentally Romantic view of the world, an orientation that suffused his cosmology, his human anthropology, and even his doctrine of deity."¹⁹ Givens claims that Smith is closer to Emerson and Whitman than

16. Andrew Schwartz, "We Are Not Alone: Considerations for a Mormon Theology of Religions," 9.

17. Knitter, *Without Buddha*, 215.

18. Schwartz and Cobb, "All Worship the Same God," 25.

19. Terryl L. Givens, *Wrestling the Angel: The Foundations of Mormon Thought: Cosmos, God, Humanity* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 52.

to Alexander Campbell and the restoration movements of nineteenth-century American Christianity.

But in essential ways, Smith had more in common with the secular apostles Walt Whitman and Ralph Waldo Emerson than with a Stone or Campbell. As David Holland has recently demonstrated, Smith was one of many American religious figures who resisted the strictures of a closed canon; he just happened to be more successful than most in creating “a Bible with the back cover torn off.”²⁰

The Bible with the cover torn off creates a possibility that is much more open to finding truth in multiple places. As Nephi says in the Book of Mormon:

For behold, I shall speak unto the Jews and they shall write it; and I shall also speak unto the Nephites and they shall write it; and I shall also speak unto the other tribes of the house of Israel, which I have led away, and they shall write it; and I shall also speak unto all nations of the earth and they shall write it. (2 Ne. 29:10–12)

DIFFERENCES WITHIN MORMONISM: WITH WHOM DO YOU DIALOGUE?

Cobb and Schwartz point out that “[b]ecause of the diverse expressions of each tradition, there are times when the differences within Christianity are greater than the differences between Christian, Jewish, and Muslim thinkers.”²¹ Despite their rhetoric, which usually sounds like traditional Christian theism, Mormons believe not just in a personal ultimate but in an embodied God(s), potential divinity in all humanity—and perhaps in the earth itself—and eternal truths to be found in all religions and intellectual traditions. Sterling McMurrin claimed that Mormonism was “in principle basically non-absolutistic.”²² This did not mean that in their everyday discourse Mormons didn’t talk about God using the same absolutist terms as other Christians; rather, it meant only that their idea of God would not let them do so consistently. McMurrin’s view is at least one Mormon take on this. There are others that are much more absolutist and theistic, but even these are quite heterodox in comparison to most of the theistic theological tradition. This has always been the case. It is

20. Givens, 30–31.

21. Schwartz and Cobb, “All Worship the Same God,” 26.

22. Sterling McMurrin, *Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* (University of Utah Press, 1966), 35–40.

likewise with Christianity. And this is at the basis of the interminable discussion of whether or not Mormons are Christians.

Christianity, like any religion, may not reducible to one static doctrine discovered through a philosophical analysis of scripture and metaphysics. In this way Christianity is given a dictionary definition as classical theism, though which kind of classical theism is still being argued. Under this view, Mormonism is not classical theism, so Mormons are not Christians. But how do we classify other so-called heterodox groups and thinkers who weren't classical theists—for example, the mystics Angelus Silesius, Meister Eckhart, and Jacob Boehme, or nontraditional theists like G. W. F. Hegel, Gabriel Marcel, or F. W. J. von Schelling, who all claim to be Christian? How do we categorize the process theologians in this century who see God as processive (i.e., that God is capable of change and is changed through his relation to the world, which view fundamentally opposes traditional theistic views that God's perfection means that God cannot change) such as William James? What of nontraditional personalists such as the Methodist Edgar S. Brightman and perhaps Martin Luther King, or the Russian Orthodox theologian Nicolas Berdyaev, who was about to be tried for heresy before the Russian Revolution but who *Time Magazine* declared the most important Eastern Orthodox thinker of the twentieth century?

PLURAL ULTIMATES?

David Griffin thinks that one way to explain the plurality within and between traditions is to think about the plurality of ultimates. John Hick and Robert Neville have both claimed that religions talk about personal and non-personal ultimates but "ultimately" seem to favor an impersonal ultimate. For Neville, as for Hick, the mystics seem to be the authorities on this. Schelling and Berdyaev claimed an ethical/personal ultimate with and impersonal mythic impersonal ultimate. Paul Tillich rationalized this as the ground of being beyond God. Griffin has added a third ultimate: the world. He explains:

One of these [ultimates], corresponding with what Whitehead calls "creativity," has been called "Emptiness" ("Śūnyatā") or "Dharmakaya" by Buddhists, "Nirguna Brahman" by Advaita Vedāntists, "the Godhead" by Meister Eckhart, and "Being Itself" by Heidegger and Tillich (among others). It is the formless ultimate reality. The other ultimate, corresponding with what Whitehead calls "God," is not Being Itself but the Supreme Being. It is in-formed and the source of forms (such as truth, beauty, and justice).

It has been called “Amida Buddha,” “Sambhogakaya,” “Saguna Brahman,” “Ishvara,” “Yahweh,” “Christ,” and “Allah” . . . [the third ultimate is] the cosmos, the universe, “the totality of [finite] things . . . illustrated by forms of Taoism and many primal religions, including Native American religions, that regards the cosmos as sacred.”²³

There is a similar solution to the problem presented by some early Mormons, who suggest that intelligence is the primal ground or absolute and that personal beings develop from this ground. Consider the following description of the Mormon understanding of God from Charles W. Penrose:

But, if God is an individual spirit and dwells in a body, the question will arise, “Is He the Eternal Father?” Yes, He is the Eternal Father. “Is it a fact that He never had a beginning?” In the elementary particles of His organism, He did not. But if He is an organized Being, there must have been a time when that being was organized. . . . This spirit which pervades all things, which is the light and life of all things, by which our heavenly Father operates, by which He is omnipotent, never had a beginning and never will have an end. It is the light of truth; it is the spirit of intelligence. If you see a living blade of grass you see a manifestation of that Spirit which is called God. If you see an animal of any kind on the face of the earth having life, there is a manifestation of that Spirit. If you see a man you behold its most perfect earthly manifestation. And if you see a glorified man, a man who has passed through the various grades of being, who has overcome all things, who has been raised from the dead, who has been quickened by this spirit in its fullness, there you see manifested, in its perfection, this eternal, beginningless, endless spirit of intelligence. Such a Being is our Father and our God, and we are following in His footsteps. He has attained to perfection. . . . This spirit cannot be fully comprehended in our finite state. It quickens all things.²⁴

What Penrose describes here is an experience of the ultimate in a personal and impersonal form. For God as a person, there was a time before that being was organized. But “[t]his spirit which pervades all things, which is the light and life of all things, by which our heavenly Father operates, by which He is omnipotent, never had a beginning and never will have an end.”²⁵ This is an ultimate that advances from an impersonal to a personal form. In traditional theism, the eternal personal being exists in eternity, outside of space and time. In many Eastern and mystical traditions, the eternal impersonal absolute exists outside in eternity transcending time and space. Here we have a personal form of God the eternal Father and an impersonal form

23. Griffin, *Deep Religious Pluralism*, 47, 49.

24. Charles W. Penrose, November 16, 1884, *Journal of Discourses*, 26:25–26.

25. Penrose, 26:25–26.

as Spirit and Intelligence. The personal form exists in time and space, and, as we will see (and unlike most Eastern and mystical traditions), this personal being is an improvement or a fulfillment of an impersonal absolute. Yet it is the structure of existence which implies the mutual interdependence of all finite beings, and particularly personal ones, that will provide an absolute moral law that structures the existing individuals.

BODHISATTVAS AND SAVIORS ON MOUNT ZION

Over the years, Mormons have entered into dialogue with conservative Christians. This is good and is certainly a part of the American context of our origins. But it seems incredibly limiting. There are elements of Mormonism going back to its founders that may bring at least some Mormons closer to other heterodox Christian traditions and even the personal/impersonal traditions of the Eastern religion. I'm in no sense an expert on Mahayana Buddhism, but I want to sketch how encountering certain Mahayana ideas might vitalize Mormon ideas of deification in ways that considering it from a Christian perspective does not. Mahayana Buddhists have claimed there are as many Buddhas as the sands of the seas. At least on the face of it, this is closer to Brigham Young's speculations about Gods than anything in Christian traditions. Mahayana Buddhists understand bodhisattvas as fully enlightened saviors who, though capable of entering the unconditioned bliss of Nirvana, have vowed not to do so until all beings have been gathered in before them. Out of super-abounding compassion, bodhisattvas, solely out of their super-abounding compassion, strive age after age to liberate others from Samsara—the vast sea of suffering and ignorance. They even vow to pass through and, if need be, endure the pains of all the many *Narakas*, those horridly numerous and ingeniously terrifying Buddhist hells—which are “infinitely fine” but not everlasting—in pursuit of the lost. But then, in fact, in a marvelous and radiant inversion of all expectations, it turns out that such compassion is itself already the highest liberation and beatitude, and that, seen in this light, the difference between Samsara and Nirvana simply vanishes. One is in Zion as soon as one becomes pure in heart. One doesn't have to be an expert on Mahayana Buddhism to see the similarity of certain interpretations of Mormon ideas regarding deification and the Bodhisattva as portrayed in Śhāntideva's *Way of the Bodhisattva*.²⁶ There is an incredible moral beauty in the very idea of such a figure. This position is at the op-

26. Śhāntideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva* (Shambhala, 2011), Kindle edition.

posite end of the spectrum from exclusivist positions. We might admire the passion of the person who believes he possesses the one and only truth, but our passion for our tradition does not exclude all others as creations of evil. The evangelical philosopher and Christian exclusivist William Lane Craig has written that God has actualized the best possible world

containing an optimal balance between the saved and the unsaved, and those who are unsaved suffer transworld damnation . . . the orthodox Christian is not inconsistent in affirming that an omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent God exists and that some people do not receive Christ and are damned.²⁷

If Mormons think of humans as becoming “saviors on Mount Zion,” it’s difficult for Mormons to think of anything like William Lane Craig’s transworld damned because, from that point of view, the “infinite love” and “omnipotent benevolence” of the Christian God would ultimately prove immeasurably less generous or effectual than the “great compassion” and “expedient means” of the numberless, indefatigably merciful bodhisattvas populating the Mahayana religious imagination. Though the way Christians often think of Christ’s harrowing of hell resembles the Bodhisattva’s descent into the *Narakas*, honestly, by comparison, the usual interpretation of that descent to the unremitting campaign of universal rescue conducted by the saviors of Buddhism seems a weekend charity visit to a homeless center.

Years ago, as a graduate student at the University of Toronto, an Episcopal friend asked me if he’d understood the Mormon conception of hell correctly. He said: “Let me get this right. The Mormon hell is a place where you go and take the missionary lessons until you convert.” That’s close, and as with Buddhism, what is required is that we have the mighty change of heart that moves us from self-centeredness to compassion. Buddhists could help us better understand what Saviors on Mount Zion and Mormon Deification means.

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27. William Lane Craig, “No other Name: A Middle Knowledge Perspective on the Exclusivity of Salvation through Christ,” in *The Philosophical Challenge of Religious Diversity*, edited by Philip Quin and Kevin Meeker (Oxford University Press, 2000), 50–51.

Personalist Seminar and cochair Levinas Philosophy Summer Seminars, in Vilnius, Buffalo, Berkeley, and Rome and was codirector of the NEH Summer Seminar on Levinas at the University at Buffalo during the summers of 2017 and 2022. His recent publications have dealt with concepts of hell in existentialism, Satan and demonic evil in Boehme, Schelling, and Dostoevsky, and the problem of evil in Mormonism. He is currently coediting the writings of the Mormon philosopher William H. Chamberlin and working on a study on Chamberlin's thought.

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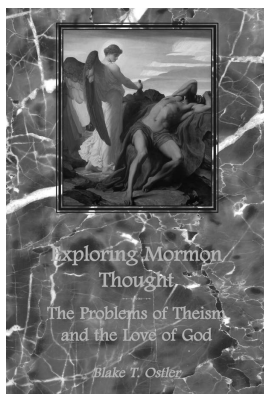


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IN VOLUME TWO, *The Problems of Theism and the Love of God*, Ostler explores issues related to soteriology, or the theory of salvation. (ISBN: 978-1-58958-095-4)

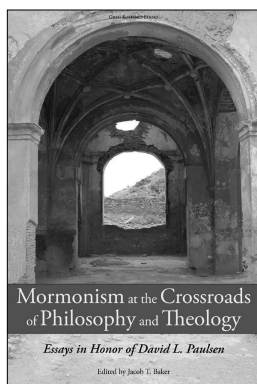
IN VOLUME THREE, *Of God and Gods*, Ostler analyzes and responds to the arguments of contemporary international theologians, reconstructs and interprets Joseph Smith's important King Follett Discourse and Sermon in the Grove, and argues persuasively for the Mormon doctrine of "robust deification." (ISBN: 978-1-58958-107-4)

IN VOLUME FOUR, *God's Plan to Heal Evil*, Ostler examines how others in the Christian and Mormon traditions have attempted to provide solutions to this challenge and the shortcomings they contain. He then looks to Mormon theology to offer what he calls the Plan of Agape, or what is perhaps the most robust explanation of how belief in a loving, personal God can be had in light of all of the suffering that exists in the world. (ISBN: 978-1-58958-191-3)

Praise for the *Exploring Mormon Thought* series:

"These books are the most important works on Mormon theology ever written. There is nothing currently available that is even close to the rigor and sophistication of these volumes. B. H. Roberts and John A. Widtsoe may have had interesting insights in the early part of the twentieth century, but they had neither the temperament nor the training to give a rigorous defense of their views in dialogue with a wider stream of Christian theology. Sterling McMurrin and Truman Madsen had the capacity to engage Mormon theology at this level, but neither one did."

—Neal A. Maxwell Institute, Brigham Young University



Mormonism at the Crossroads of Philosophy and Theology: Essays in Honor of David L. Paulsen

Edited by Jacob T. Baker

Paperback, ISBN: 978-1-58958-192-0

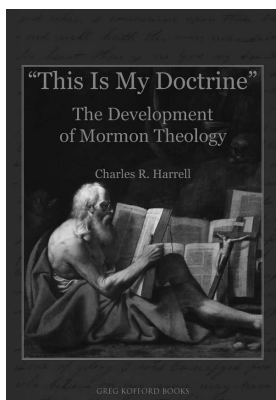
"There is no better measure of the growing importance of Mormon thought in contemporary religious debate than this volume of essays for David Paulsen. In a large part thanks to him, scholars from all over the map are discussing the questions Mormonism raises about the nature of God and the purpose of life. These essays let us in on a discussion in progress." —RICHARD LYMAN BUSHMAN, author of *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*.

"This book makes it clear that there can be no real ecumenism without the riches of the Mormon mind. Professor Paulsen's impact on LDS thought is well known. . . . These original and insightful essays chart a new course for Christian intellectual life." —PETER A. HUFF, and author of *Vatican II* and *The Voice of Vatican II*

"This volume of smart, incisive essays advances the case for taking Mormonism seriously within the philosophy of religion—an accomplishment that all generations of Mormon thinkers should be proud of." —PATRICK Q. MASON, Howard W. Hunter Chair of Mormon Studies, Claremont Graduate University

"These essays accomplish a rare thing—bringing light rather than heat to an on-going conversation. And the array of substantial contributions from outstanding scholars and theologians within and outside Mormonism is itself a fitting tribute to a figure who has been at the forefront of bringing Mormonism into dialogue with larger traditions." —TERRY L. GIVENS, author of *People of Paradox: A History of Mormon Culture*

"The emergence of a vibrant Mormon scholarship is nowhere more in evidence than in the excellent philosophical contributions of David Paulsen." —RICHARD J. MOUW, President, Fuller Theological Seminary, author of *Talking with Mormons: An Invitation to Evangelicals*



“This is My Doctrine”: The Development of Mormon Theology

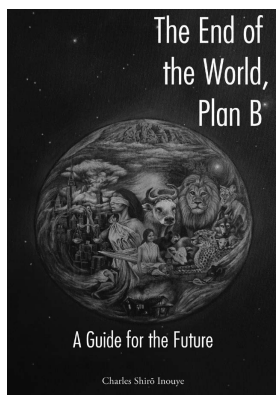
Charles R. Harrell

Hardcover, ISBN: 978-1-58958-103-6

The principal doctrines defining Mormonism today often bear little resemblance to those it started out with in the early 1830s. This book shows that these doctrines did not originate in a vacuum but were rather prompted and informed by the religious culture from which Mormonism arose. Early Mormons, like their early Christian and even earlier Israelite predecessors, brought with them their own varied culturally conditioned theological presuppositions (a process of convergence) and only later acquired a more distinctive theological outlook (a process of differentiation).

In this first-of-its-kind comprehensive treatment of the development of Mormon theology, Charles Harrell traces the history of Latter-day Saint doctrines from the times of the Old Testament to the present. He describes how Mormonism has carried on the tradition of the biblical authors, early Christians, and later Protestants in reinterpreting scripture to accommodate new theological ideas while attempting to uphold the integrity and authority of the scriptures. In the process, he probes three questions: How did Mormon doctrines develop? What are the scriptural underpinnings of these doctrines? And what do critical scholars make of these same scriptures? In this enlightening study, Harrell systematically peels back the doctrinal accretions of time to provide a fresh new look at Mormon theology.

“This Is My Doctrine” will provide those already versed in Mormonism’s theological tradition with a new and richer perspective of Mormon theology. Those unacquainted with Mormonism will gain an appreciation for how Mormon theology fits into the larger Jewish and Christian theological traditions.



The End of the World, Plan B: A Guide for the Future

Charles Shirō Inouye

Paperback, ISBN: 978-1-58958-755-7

Praise for *End of the World, Plan B*:

“Mormonism needs Inouye’s voice. We need, in general, voices that are a bit less Ayn Rand and a bit more Siddhartha Gautama. Inouye reminds us that justice is not enough and that obedience is not the currency of salvation. He urges us to recognize the limits of the law, to see that, severed from a willingness to compassionately suffer with the world’s imperfection and evanescence, our righteous hunger for balancing life’s books will destroy us all.”

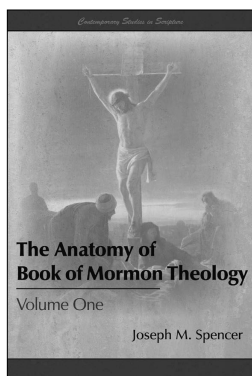
— Adam S. Miller, author of *Rube Goldberg Machines: Essays in Mormon Theology* and *Letters to a Young Mormon*

“Drawing on Christian, Buddhist, Daoist, and other modes of thought, Charles Inouye shows how an attitude of hope can arise from a narrative of doom. *The End of the World, Plan B* is not simply a rethinking of the end of our world, but is a meditation on the possibility of compassionate self-transformation. In a world that looks to the just punishment of the wicked, Inouye shows how sorrow, which comes from the demands of justice, can create peace, forgiveness, and love.”

— Michael D.K. Ing, Assistant Professor, Department of Religious Studies, Indiana University

“For years I’ve hoped to see a book that related Mormonism to the great spiritual traditions beyond Christianity and Judaism. Charles Inouye has done this in one of the best Mormon devotional books I’ve ever read. His Mormon reading of the fourfold path of the Bodhisattva offers a beautiful eschatology of the end/purpose of the world as the revelation of compassion. I hope the book is read widely.”

— James M. McLachlan, co-editor of *Discourses in Mormon Theology: Philosophical and Theological Possibilities*



The Anatomy of Book of Mormon Theology, 2 vols.

Joseph M. Spencer

Paperback, ISBN: 978-1-58958-780-9

Hardcover, ISBN: 978-1-58958-781-6

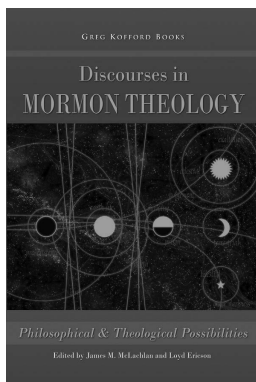
Paperback, ISBN: 978-1-58958-783-0

Hardcover, ISBN: 978-1-58958-784-7

Few scholars of the Book of Mormon have read this volume of scripture as closely and rigorously as Joseph M. Spencer. And of those, none have devoted as much time and effort as he to a theological reading of that sacred text—that is, as Spencer writes, “how it might shape responsible thinking about questions pertaining to the life of religious commitment” (p. 1:173.)

The Anatomy of Book of Mormon Theology divides into two volumes exploring and thinking about these pertinent questions. In the first volume, Spencer gathers early essays in which he gestures toward theological interpretation without knowing how to defend it; essays about why theology is important to Book of Mormon scholarship and how to ensure that it does not overstep its boundaries; and essays that do theological work on the Book of Mormon in relatively obvious ways or with relatively traditional topics. The last category of essays divides into two subcategories: essays specifically on the central theological question of Jesus Christ’s atonement, as the Book of Mormon understands it; and essays on a variety of traditional theological topics, again as the Book of Mormon understands them.

The second volume ask about what new worlds might be discovered in doing theological work on the Book of Mormon, focusing on what Spencer calls “microscopic” and “macroscopic” theological readings of the text. Essays in the first set examine no more than a verse of the Book of Mormon—more often just a single phrase or two—to see what theological implications lie within the details of the text. The second set of essays ask questions about the shape and intentions of the whole of the Book of Mormon, as this can be discerned through the ways it deploys biblical texts—and especially the writings of Isaiah. A third set of essays follows the two on microscopic and macroscopic styles of theology and are invitations to blur the boundaries that separate different styles of Book of Mormon scholarship. These final essays call on Book of Mormon scholars to move closer to theology and calls on theologians to move closer to the Book of Mormon.



Discourses in Mormon Theology: Philosophical and Theological Possibilities

Edited by
James M. McLachlan and Loyd Ericson

Hardcover, ISBN: 978-1-58958-103-6

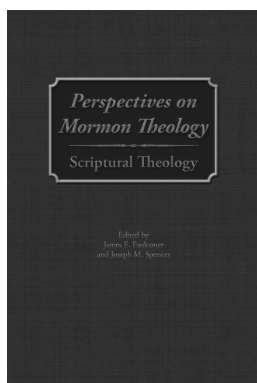
A mere two hundred years old, Mormonism is still in its infancy compared to other theological disciplines (Judaism, Catholicism, Buddhism, etc.). This volume will introduce its reader to the rich blend of theological viewpoints that exist within Mormonism. The essays break new ground in Mormon studies by exploring the vast expanse of philosophical territory left largely untouched by traditional approaches to Mormon theology. It presents philosophical and theological essays by many of the finest minds associated with Mormonism in an organized and easy-to-understand manner and provides the reader with a window into the fascinating diversity amongst Mormon philosophers. Open-minded students of pure religion will appreciate this volume's thoughtful inquiries.

These essays were delivered at the first conference of the Society for Mormon Philosophy and Theology. Authors include Grant Underwood, Blake T. Ostler, Dennis Potter, Margaret Merrill Toscano, James E. Faulconer, and Robert L. Millet

Praise for *Discourses in Mormon Theology*:

"In short, *Discourses in Mormon Theology* is an excellent compilation of essays that are sure to feed both the mind and soul. It reminds all of us that beyond the white shirts and ties there exists a universe of theological and moral sensitivity that cries out for study and acclamation."

-Jeff Needle, Association for Mormon Letters



Perspectives on Mormon Theology: Scriptural Theology

Edited by James E. Faulconer
and Joseph M. Spencer

Paperback, ISBN: 978-1-58958-712-0

Hardcover, ISBN: 978-1-58958-713-7

The phrase “theology of scripture” can be understood in two distinct ways. First, theology of scripture would be reflection on the nature of scripture, asking questions about what it means for a person or a people to be oriented by a written text (rather than or in addition to an oral tradition or a ritual tradition). In this first sense, theology of scripture would form a relatively minor part of the broader theological project, since the nature of scripture is just one of many things on which theologians reflect. Second, theology of scripture would be theological reflection guided by scripture, asking questions of scriptural texts and allowing those texts to shape the direction the theologian’s thoughts pursue. In this second sense, theology of scripture would be less a part of the larger theological project than a way of doing theology, since whatever the theologian takes up reflectively, she investigates through the lens of scripture.

The essays making up this collection reflect attentiveness to both ways of understanding the phrase “theology of scripture.” Each essay takes up the relatively un-self-conscious work of reading a scriptural text but then—at some point or another—asks the self-conscious question of exactly what she or he is doing in the work of reading scripture. We have thus attempted in this book (1) to create a dialogue concerning what scripture is for Latter-day Saints, and (2) to focus that dialogue on concrete examples of Latter-day Saints reading actual scripture texts.