

Three Positive Thoughts On Mormonism:

- 1. A plurality of worlds, reflections on Erich Robert Paul's *Science, Religion, and Mormon Cosmology* (University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1992)**
- 2. A fairer distribution of salvation, reflections on saving the dead from reading Jeffrey A. Trumbower's *Rescue for the dead, The Posthumous Salvation of Non-Christians in Early Christianity* (Oxford University press, 2001) (With a Postscript based on *The Life Beyond*, by Robert L. Millet and Joseph Fielding McConkie (Bookcraft, Salt Lake City, 1986).**
- 3. Empowering all as prophets, reflections on W. Jeffrey Marsh's *The Light Within, What the Prophet Joseph Smith Taught Us about Personal Revelation* (Deseret Book, Salt Lake City, 2000)**

Three powerful arguments for, and not against, Mormonism, are its expansive cosmology, its democratic bestowal of salvation, and its empowerment of every individual as a prophet (to their own domain). It is a vision that goes into all

time, forward and backward, and throughout all space, and into every head and heart. I will illustrate in three parts.

***Part 1: Cosmology.* I read portions of the first book by Paul and found the tracing of the strains of thought that possibly amalgamated into the Mormon idea of a plurality of inhabited worlds to be interesting. On his pages 85 and 86 Paul suggests the major influences to have been enigmatic statements in scripture, rather than studied inclusion of speculations on the subject by Greek philosophers. But I was not reading the book to find out where Joseph Smith found his inspiration for his holistic cosmology that claimed there were worlds without number whose inhabitants were . . . "begotten sons and daughters of God" (page 87, citing D&C 76, 24 and 112). I was reading it to explore that cosmology a bit further than I had heretofore.**

Paul does a nice job exploring how this cosmology was explained and amplified by several Mormon leaders with science credentials, and I particularly appreciated his sections on B.H. Roberts and James Talmage on pages 152 through 155. But as I read these sections I realized it was not what I was looking for either, although I did enjoy Robert's speculations on advanced societies on other worlds as I would have anyone else's reasoned speculation on the same subject.

Where my interest was finally peaked was at the very end where the SETI (Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence) project is discussed in the mormon cosmological context. Paul shows he is aware of the fact that there is research that suggests there is a very low probability of life on other worlds

(pp. 221-222). This is coming from biologists, and I have just ordered a book on this very subject to be described in Part 1 of this book review series. It is Simon Conway Morris's "Life's Solution: Inevitable Humans in a Lonely Universe."

Paul rightly suggests that these biology-based views are incompatible with, and if supported and accepted they negate, Mormon (and like-minded Christian's) plural-inhabited-worlds cosmology (page 222):

This places Mormons, and indeed many Christians, in a potentially serious position. On the one hand, there are some really powerful and almost persuasive scientific arguments against the SETI position. On the other hand, in Mormon theology God (male/female) propagates spiritual and eventually physical progeny that will ultimately require worlds without number. Consequently Mormons are scripturally and theologically committed to the idea of the existence of extraterrestrials and advanced civilizations throughout the universe.

The seduction of a natural theology could divert the concerns of Mormons and lead them to divest themselves of this portion of their theology—a highly unlikely move, because astronomical pluralism is intimately wedded to the entire fabric of Mormon beliefs.

Paul continues by observing that it is easier for Mormons to simply suspend their opinion the SETI issue. Paul rightly suggests the questioning of the likelihood of SETI success is based on both the results and the speculations of science. He defends this attitude of keeping science in abeyance rather than accepting it and throwing out one's plural-worlds theology in peculiarly strong yet cautious words (p. 222):

The natural theology approach [Paul says this means jettisoning religious convictions and accepting the verdict of science] is both useless and unproductive, and arguments against SETI, though far from conclusive, are severe enough that they should be taken seriously.

Paul, like the blatantly anti-Mormon Ankerberg and Weldon book I also review in this series, notes that the Mormon view of angels makes them advanced (immortal) extraterrestrials whose understanding allows them to travel in space. His parting observation, that there must be an advanced civilization out there, somewhere, whose "electromagnetic seepage would be detectable" but that SETI has found the heavens "utterly quiet" electromagnetically underscores this new frontier between science and faith. Intuitively there should be such a thing, scientifically there is neither experimental nor supportable hypothetical argument for such populations to be 'out there.' It is a matter of faith.

So how does this relate to what follows? It is another dimension into which Mormons project salvation. Other worlds throughout the universe, this world, in the past as well as the present, are eligible for salvation. Similarly, personal revelation is a gift to and part of the nature of all 'begotten sons and daughters of God' no matter what world they inhabit or when they inhabited that world or another. It is about as multi-dimensional a view of God/humanity as it is possible to imagine.

Part 2: Saving the dead.* In my review of Huston Smith's *Why Religion Matters, The Fate of the Human Spirit in an Age of

***Disbelief*, I noted how excited and relived he was to learn of a universal salvation and of the temporary nature of hell if there is such a thing at all.**

After all, how is it fair to only save those who lived where and when there was an opportunity to hear of and accept Christ. I feel the same way, even now. I really do not believe in the concept of salvation, but when I did, and even now, I wonder(ed) how those who believe in salvation only for those who accept Christ in this life and believed correctly only can possibly function in this world. Especially since such belief usually also includes a fiery place of eternal torment for those who only sin may have been to have had a bad hair day when the missionaries came by, or who lived in a place and/or time where or when Christ was not known.

Mormonism took this bull by the horns and wrestled it into a complex endeavor that includes genealogical research and taking names of deceased persons through a sequence of ceremonies in a temple to give to them what they need to be saved. This is much more democratic. In addition, Mormons do not believe in a literal hell. A much more benign treatment of the unbeliever is foreseen in the afterlife, in other worlds. Little to fear, much to look forward to.

The reason I stopped to read this book by Trumbower is that it showed me that my inability to live with the idea that the dead were damned, especially my unbelieving relatives, was a rather universal and ancient idea, with roots in Judaism as well as the New Testament. There have been fairminded in the Judaeo-Christian movement for a very long time, in other words.

As it so happens, this practice was in the news recently. An Associated Press story says that the Russian Orthodox Church

is objecting to the Mormon use of the historical membership rosters they purchased. This is in addition to Jewish protests over Jewish names being baptized by proxy. The news story says the U.S. office of the Russian orthodox Church says that "the Mormons have no right to rebaptize people into a different faith after their deaths. 'The decision that the person makes is made here on Earth, that's final,' said Father Joseph, the church's New York based spokesman." (Cited from Las Vegas Review-Journal of 8 December 2003, page 5B.)

And that is exactly what is unfair about the normative, limited Christian dispensing of salvation, in my opinion. Trumbower, in his Introduction, says that death was not always the salvation boundary that it is now (page 3):

. . . the Christian imagination in the West has usually drawn a sharp boundary at death, following this general principle: If an individual did not join up with the saved community during this life, joining it after death would be impossible. This book examines how and why death came to be perceived as such a firm boundary of salvation chiefly by analyzing exceptions to this general principle from ancient Christianity. It finds that the principle itself was slow to develop and not universally accepted in the Christian movement's first four hundred years. In fact, only in the West was this principle definitively articulated, due in large part to the work and influence of Augustine. Many early Christians were able to retain their sense of chosenness and their sense of God's justice while allowing for the possibility of posthumous salvation for non-Christians. Many others argued vehemently on the other side, and this volume documents the developments of that conflict and its resolution in the East and West.

Trumbower next (pages 3 and 4) writes about two American Christian communities, the Shakers and Mormons, who envisioned "the possibility of posthumous salvation for non-Christians." The Shakers believed posthumous salvation was available to all, but were concerned in particular with Native Americans who did not join them when taught in the flesh, generally, but were very anxious to do so after death it seems. The living Shaker would become possessed by the spirit of a deceased Native American or other ethnic group and request salvation while thus possessed.

The Mormons' more elaborate approach is next discussed, including the controversy over the baptizing of Jews who died in the Holocaust. The church promised to erase the records of those ordinances in 1995, but the recent Associated Press article cited above notes there is a general impression this has not been properly or completely done. That article says the ones thus baptized were made Mormons, of course that is a way of ridiculing the practice. I doubt if anyone taking a name through the temple ordinances for the dead believes they are making dead people into dead Mormons, instead they sincerely believe they are bringing them under the umbrella of Christ's atonement and thus saving them. Trumbower correctly notes that the objection by Jews (and now by the Russian orthodox) is to the violation of the sacred memory of their deceased. Neither group believes the rituals performed by Mormons have any efficacy.

Trumbower goes into some detail on the Mormon practice, noting its caveats and limitations, and on page 5 suggests that Mormons now number about 10 million living and 200 million dead members. Cute. And how many billions have lived on Earth? It is a fools errand, perhaps, but it partakes of exactly

the right altruistic spirit: dispense salvation in space as well as through time to all.

Trumbower makes a comparison between the early third century story of the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* and the Mormon story on page 7. Both Joseph Smith and Perpetua were introduced to the idea of salvation for the dead through a vision of a deceased brother. Both were in movements undergoing "fierce persecution." Trumbower discusses the motives for the practice of saving the dead and suggests they are mixed. Fair enough. He ends his Introduction saying (page 9) that: . . . "beliefs and practices concerning salvation for the dead can disclose a great deal about the world of the living." So it is.

On pages 26 and 27 Trumbower tells of the instance of attempted salvation for the dead in Second Maccabees 12:39-45 from about 164 B.C. or whenever it was edited. He next moves into the New testament, and discusses the ambiguity on the subject in that collection of writings (page 33). The star exhibit, of course, is First Corinthians 15:29, about which he says (pages 35-36):

Enormous vats of ink have been emptied in both pre-critical and critical scholarship speculating on precisely what those Corinthian Christians were doing, why they were doing it, and Paul's attitude toward it. A though 51-page survey of opinion from the second century down to 1962 was assembled by Mathis Rissi; there is no need to rehearse that entire history here. I agree with Rissi and Hans Conzelmann (and, for that matter, with Mormon Prophet Joseph Smith), that the grammar and logic of the passage point to a practice of vicarious baptism of a living person for the benefit of a dead person.

Trumbower also cites several well known works of pious fiction of the first few centuries, such as the *Shepherd of Hermes*, *Similitudes 9.16.2-7*, the *Sibylline Oracles 2:330-338*, and the *Apocalypse of Peter 14:1-4* that also refer to some aspect of the practice of baptism for the dead or at least the expectation of salvation after death for some who were righteous in life. Apparently what the Corinthians were doing was also an accepted practice among the Marcionite sect, we learn from the anti-heresy writings of the early Church Father Tertullian, who later in life joined that very heresy he fought for years. To his excommunication notice Tertullian responded with one of my favorite phrase from history, . . . "a council of Bishops doth not truth make." So there.

Paul's apparent belief in an obviously posthumous universal salvation, based on Romans 11:25-32 as well as other citations, is discussed on pages 39 through 41. Interesting. On page 41 the obvious question is asked: why be good in this life if all will be saved anyway? It was a question addressed by theologians by basically shutting this door to salvation definitively. That is the subject of an entire chapter in Trumbower's book. We won't go there.

Page 41 has Trumbower suggesting that this universal salvation idea was in conflict with Paul's idea of eternal torment for wickedness in Second Thessalonians 1:9. Trumbower suggests, however, that this letter may be pseudonymous, and even if it is not the literal meaning of eternal here is eternal destruction, annihilation, not torment. This, in turn, fits with the Pauline statement about the "eschatological annihilation of all evil powers in 1 Cor. 15:24-28." So, are the wicked saved or annihilated? There is ambiguity here. Trumbower suggests the debate raged in early

Christianity, dies for a time, and then was revived by the nineteenth-century Universalists. In America, of course.

Trumbower's book is interesting all the way through, but I am now skipping to its very end where, on page 155, he suggests that Purgatory in the West and prayers for the dead in the East were instituted to enable "Christian civilization to continue the ancient piety of helping the dead, but with restrictions on who could be helped."

His concluding paragraph again mentions Mormons, and Shakers:

Latter-day Saints and Shakers of the nineteenth century revived certain types of posthumous salvation, without necessarily being aware of the earlier history, save the one Pauline passage about baptism on behalf of the dead, I Cor. 15:29. This shows that the religious impulse to rescue the dead can arise any time there is enthusiasm for the new activity of God in the world. If the living can share in the new blessing bestowed by God, why should the dead be excluded? If the living can reorient themselves, repent, and/or benefit from the prayers of the living, why not the dead? For the Shakers, Mormons, and Universalists of the nineteenth century, reinterpreting traditional Christianity also meant throwing off traditional Christian restrictions on salvation for the dead. Those Christians, like Augustine, who reject posthumous salvation find themselves in the paradoxical position of affirming the continued existence of the personality after death, but rejecting the idea that the personality of the unbaptized and grievous sinners might grow or change as they did throughout life.

Trumbower ends the book saying he has sympathy for those of every age who want to rescue the dead, but he is not taking sides in this debate, he just wanted to illuminate the history of the debate. I think he did just that, and did it very well.

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POSTSCRIPT TO PART 2 BASED ON: *The Life Beyond*, by Robert L. Millet and Joseph Fielding McConkie (Bookcraft, Salt Lake City, 1986).

A Mormon View On Universal (With Caveats) Salvation

I have given a Mormon view of the universality of the invitation to salvation from a non-Mormon source. To show that the picture thus painted is not far off the mark, I will return to a previously cited book, namely *The Life Beyond*, by Robert L. Millet and Joseph Fielding McConkie (Bookcraft, Salt Lake City, 1986).

Although it is replete with references to salvation for the living and the dead, it is especially its last chapter, “That All May Be Saved,” that speaks to the issue of universal salvation. But its chapters describing “The Gospel: Here and Hereafter” and “The Gift of Salvation” also have some material I will mine to augment the above review.

First, on page 52, there is a quote from Mormon scripture (Doctrine & Covenants 138:57-59) that makes it very clear that in the world of spirits a missionary effort is at work, using the Mormon elders who have died, to preach:

. . . the gospel of repentance and redemption, through the sacrifice of the Only Begotten Son of God, among those

who are in darkness and are under the bondage of sin in the great world of the spirits of the dead.

The dead who repent will be redeemed, through obedience to the ordinances of the house of God,

And after they have paid the penalty of their transgressions, and are washed clean, shall receive a reward according to their works, for they are heirs of salvation.

That is pretty clear I think, and shows how the work done for the dead in temples is made efficacious: by the decisions of the dead to hear and accept what is taught them. They are not “made Mormons,” they are extended salvation through Christ.

On page 131 there is a sweeping declaration of what salvation is:

Salvation is the greatest of all the gifts of God. It is the rightful inheritance of those who have come to think as God thinks, believe as he believes, and thus experience what he experiences. It entitles such individuals to the power and might of the Eternal Father and thus a joint heir-ship with Christ the Lord. They become equal with their Master in power, might, and dominion. Such are the promises extended to those of whom the scriptures declare: “Ye are gods; and all of you are children of the most High” (Psalm 82:6).

The pages that follow explain that eternal life, salvation and exaltation are all nuances of the same thing, and unabashedly explain there are qualifications, requirements, that must be met and take time to meet even after death. On page 138 for example, speaking obviously to current Mormons, the authors say that “Gaining salvation and attaining perfection are

processes, lengthy processes which will go on even after the time of death.”

The universal availability (in space as well as time) is mentioned several times in this chapter, and summarized this way on page 141: “Salvation in the highest heaven is a reality and a possibility, a goal within the reach of all mankind.”

Just as did the Gnostics of old, the Mormons claim to know the substance of what was taught in Jesus’ 40-day post resurrection ministry among his disciples. On page 159 the claim is made that “the major purpose of the forty-day ministry” was “to teach the nature of the vicarious ordinances, and to instruct the Apostles in the fulness of the temple ceremony.” The temples, of course, exist to provide these saving ordinances to the living and to the dead.

The authors of this book refer to historical Jewish and Christian mentions of salvation for the dead, and cite several compelling examples. So, there is a definite Mormon awareness of these historical references to the salvation for the dead.

The authors of this work on the afterlife from a Mormon perspective end their book on page 165 by telling what effect it had upon the believer in these “revelations that part the veil and allow us to see beyond the grave.” That effect is to be uplifted and ennobled, to have “peace and consolation,” to have enhanced faith and fire in the soul, and to bring “men worthily to God.” Mourning for “those of the household of faith” involves “tears of rejoicing, for we know the glories that await us.” On the other hand, tears shed for those who received and rejected this gospel of Christ are true tears of mourning opportunities deliberately lost. I am sorry that at

my demise any tears will be of the latter variety. I would love to be able to believe again because what Millet and McConkie say about the effects of such belief on and in a person are true. But alas, one cannot force oneself into a state of belief. And acting the part without belief, for the sake of the feelings of others, is simply not in my repertoire.

***Part 3: Everyone as prophet.* Thoughts from reading W. Jeffrey Marsh's *The Light Within*.**

I could have dragged an older book into this discussion, but someone recently claimed that personal revelation was no longer encouraged in the Mormon faith. So it was important for me to peruse this relatively new book, published by the official publishing house of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Marsh puts that assertion about discouraging personal revelation in the waste basket where it belongs.

However, this does not mean that all personal revelation is greeted with enthusiasm. There are examples of revelations and inspirations received that led to the excommunication of the recipient when they were warned they were teaching false doctrine yet persisted. And that illustrates the beauty of personal revelation and why most churches do not encourage it: it is institutionally uncontrollable except after the fact, and then institutional control gets messy. But I am trying to remain positive here, despite my rage (at the time) over the way Janice Allred, for just one example, was dealt with when she announced her inspirations regarding the Heavenly

Mother and the suitability of praying to Her as well as to her spouse. She was excommunicated.

Marsh describes the "Light from Heaven" of personal revelation as a "Gift from God" in these words on his pages 2 and 3:

Personal revelation—the light from heaven—is a gift from God. The ability to receive that light is also a gift placed deep within every human soul. It is an eternal part of our immortal natures. It is so much a part of us that we often take it for granted, but it is a unique and precious gift of light from God.

The light within is more than the light of Christ, or our conscience. It is the ability each of us has to receive communication from God. The light within, as that term is used in this book, is personal revelation in all its forms, including the power of discernment that flows from the light of Christ; witness or testimony from the Holy Ghost; thoughts, feelings, impressions, or comforting assurances from the Holy Ghost; the gift and power of the Holy Ghost to sanctify our souls; the gifts, peace, and feelings of pure love accompanying the Spirit of the Lord; visits by angels; and visions, dreams, and revelations from God.

The light within is meat and drink for our souls. Every one of us may receive revelation from heaven and divine inspiration for our own benefit. In fact, this power is so much a natural part of our being that many who receive such help and inspiration may be unaware of it. . . .

Marsh continues to now draw this gift from God more tightly into the Mormon-Christian context, suggesting that it will lead us into a life of faith and cause us to seek the ordinances of the temple necessary for coming back into the presence of God

(page 4). The book then wades through inspirational quotations from early and current Mormon leaders describing and admonishing the seeking after and obtaining this gift. The more interesting two chapters in the book, to me, are entitled:

- **"Be Still and Know That I Am God" (Chapter 7) which teaches meditative and other practices that can encourage this gift.**
- **"Principles of Personal Revelation" (Chapter 10) which describes the role of personal revelation in the current institutional church and describes some reasonable, I believe, caveats necessary to maintaining church order while encouraging personal revelation.**
- **"Spiritual Safeguards" (Chapter 11) which tells revelation's recipients to maintain their orthodoxy by staying within certain boundaries in their use of this gift of God. Although this chapter grated on me some, because in my own experience, I recognize it as a necessary part of maintaining an institution while at the same time also encouraging personal revelation within the members of that institution.**

Marsh's concluding chapter is called "Gratitude for the Prophet Joseph Smith" (Chapter 12) and expresses, obviously, gratitude to the person who re-taught Mormon humanity the principles of personal revelation. There is some really devout (But to a non-believer really over the top) stuff there such as:

Joseph Smith made a contribution to mankind greater than that of any theologian, scholar, or politician. In 1968 an editor for the *Toronto Star* wrote: "No matter what anyone might think of him, Joseph Smith the Mormon prophet was one of the most dynamic and

creative men of the nineteenth century. In fact, he is one of a half dozen of the greatest men of that era."

I quote that because it is probably true, even though I now feel his revelations were as questionable and self-motivated as anyone else's, it is the way he put the whole package together that showed his genius and inspiration to be real. He empowered people and bonded them together in a unique and lasting way. The Mormon faith still grows by leaps and bounds because people hunger for the certainty and community it proffers.

Of course Marsh makes the connection between Joseph Smith's example and teaching and the gift of personal revelation in this end chapter as he already did in the book's title, I was taken by this revelation of two dead sons to their mother. Necromancy? Ankerberg and Weldon call it that, but who cares? Read these words and sense the depth of pathos in this older woman:

In 1844, when Lucy mack Smith first saw the martyred bodies of her sons Hyrum and Joseph, she cried out, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken this family?" A voice replied, "I have taken them to myself, that they might have rest." [God's answer to her cry for help] She recorded, "As I looked on their peaceful, smiling countenances, I seemed almost to hear them say, 'Mother, weep not for us; we have overcome the world by love. We have carried them the gospel, that their souls might be saved; they slew us for our testimony, and thus placed us beyond their power; their ascendancy is for a moment; ours is an eternal triumph.'"

I cited that not just to have you look at the depth of her pathos, but to illustrate the two different revelatory modes she experienced in answer to her explosion of grief in her: God answers directly, then it appears in her mind as if her sons also answer her. The result was a strong woman remaining strong in the face of potentially devastating adversity, and being enabled to go on with living her life.

It is of some interest to me that her cry to God was a slight variant on the Masonic cry for help also uttered by Joseph as he fell from the window of the jail with a bullet in him. God, as the ultimate Master Mason, answered the widow's lament. This is an archetypal setting and situation and resolution. In fact, speaking of archetypes, hers is a classic revelation as that phenomenon has been described by Carl Jung: one allowing a person to move on with living after debilitating emotional suffering.

On a more positive, lighter note, I liked the last sentence in the book (p. 178) that follows advice on nurturing the gift of the light within. If we thus nurture this gift:

Then we, with the Prophet Joseph Smith, will be able to say from our own experience and from personal revelation, "When the light rested upon me, I saw" (Joseph Smith-History 1:17).

The rumor I heard about the discouraging of personal revelation in the Mormon fold is a false one, I conclude from this book. The encouragement to obtaining this spiritual experience continues, even if guardedly. Good!