

An LDS graduate of Harvard Divinity School compares Old Testament theology with Mormon reinterpretations of Israelite beliefs.

The Mormon Christianizing of the Old Testament

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Editors' Note

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W e each have a tendency to assume that others, regardless of when or where or how they live, share a similar, if not identical, view of the world with us. Thus, Christians often expect Christian ideas and Christian behavior from the people of the Old Testament. Certainly, some of the passages in the New Testament encourage this approach. For example, Jesus in the book of John claimed that the Old Testament scriptures bore witness of him¹ and that Abraham "rejoiced to see my day and was glad."² Peter equated Jesus with the prophet of whom Moses prophesied in Deuteronomy 18 and implied that Moses and all the prophets from Samuel on understood that Jesus would be the fulfillment of their prophecies.³

Mormons are particularly prone to "christianize" the Old Testament and people it with believers like themselves who hold the same priesthood, believe in the same God, anticipate the same salvation, and practice the same religious rites. Wilford Woodruff was certain that "all the teachings of the Patriarchs and Prophets have shown us but one gospel."⁴ John Taylor rhetorically asked himself, "What! do you mean to say then, that all these [Old Testament] men had the gospel? I most assuredly do, for without that they could not have had a knowledge of life and immortality."⁵ The *Messenger and Advocate* claimed that "from reflection, we have been forced into the conclusion that the gospel was as well known among the ancients as among any other people."⁶ Moreover, because Mormon scriptures and the temple ceremony describe an Old Testament people with Christian and Mormon ideas, many Church members might assume that the Old Testament itself describes such practices and beliefs.

What is the basis for this view, and how extensively does Mormonism reinterpret the Old Testament as a document about Christian people?

While John 1 in the New Testament claims that "In the

beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . all things were made by him, and without him was not anything made that was made," it does not claim that any Israelites in Old Testament times knew that Jesus Christ created the world. LDS scripture as well as the New Testament identifies the Word as Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of the Father,⁷ but LDS sources go further. There we are told that Moses was taught that God and his Son together created the world⁸ and that Adam also helped in the creation.⁹

We see hints that Adam and Eve were not deceived or tricked by a serpent into committing a tragic sin but instead knew that that Fall was a part of the plan from the first. With a good understanding of the consequences of their actions, they consciously made the right choice to disobey one commandment in order to obey another.¹⁰ This was the origin of sin in the world, and all people acquired a "carnal, sensual, and devilish" nature through this act.¹¹ After Adam and Eve were cast out of the garden, they were counseled to offer sacrifices which they understood as symbols of the future sacrifice of Christ¹² and were baptized for the remission of the sins resulting from their transgression.¹³ Adam then preached the Atonement and baptism to his descendants.¹⁴ He (and later others)¹⁵ also received the same priesthood we find in the Church today.¹⁶

Mormon sources also claim that others besides Adam were aware of Jesus Christ. The Bible presents a sketchy but tantalizing view of Enoch, who "walked with God and he was not, for God took him."¹⁷ Mormonism fills in details, saying among other things that he preached a gospel of baptism and repentance and belief in Jesus Christ's atonement for "original guilt."¹⁸

It follows logically that when Noah learned of the impending flood, he warned his contemporaries to repent or be destroyed. While the Bible gives no support for this view, Mormon scripture tells us that prior to the flood Noah, who had a full understanding of the gospel and had been given the priesthood,¹⁹ also preached baptism

in the name of Jesus Christ. If baptized, the people would receive the Holy Ghost as had their ancestors and would not perish.²⁰

Abraham, too, held the priesthood.²¹ The biblical promise that his descendants would be as numerous as the sands of the sea²² becomes, in the Book of Abraham, a priesthood blessing with a figurative cast: those who accept the gospel will also be called the descendants of Abraham.²³ John in the New Testament and Helaman in the Book of Abraham agree that Abraham rejoiced in knowing that Jesus Christ would come.²⁴

Abraham was shown that mortal beings are eternal and existed in a pre-mortal state where the great ones were assigned special earthly roles.²⁵ Two different pre-mortal spirits offered to help mankind get through the probationary period of mortality.²⁶ Abraham also saw that creation was not the work of one god but rather the work of a committee of gods thinking and acting in unison.²⁷

Moses in visions saw all that ever was on earth or ever would be as well as much of what was in heaven.²⁸ His account of the council in heaven identifies the two principal characters as Satan and Jesus and explains why Jesus' proposed role in the salvation of mankind was more acceptable than Satan's.²⁹ The tempter of Eve, just a serpent in the Bible, was really Satan, who also prompted Cain's violent action against his brother Abel and continues to entice people to evil.³⁰

Moses clearly understood and preached about Jesus Christ, God's Only Begotten Son, who not only assisted in the creation of the world but also would come to earth as a mortal to save mankind from the effects of the Fall of Adam.³¹ Moses knew that the serpent he lifted up in the wilderness symbolized Christ.³² He also anticipated a resurrection from death and a judgment to determine the state of post-mortal existence.³³

Prophecies which supposedly were available to the Israelites but are found only in the Book of Mormon testified boldly of the Messiah in very explicit detail. For

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example, Zench prophesied that he would be lifted up; Neum said that he would be crucified; Zenos claimed that he would be buried in a sepulcher and that three days of darkness would follow, during which time rocks would rend and the earth would groan.³⁴ (If the Jews of Jesus' time had knowledge of such explicit prophecy, it is hard to imagine them being too blind or stubborn to see that these matched the life of Jesus.)

Not only did these prophets preach about a messiah but the Book of Mormon teaches that the Old Testament prophets generally did also.³⁵ For example, "the prophets" said that the Messiah would be named Jesus Christ and would come to earth 600 years after Lehi left Jerusalem.³⁶ Some Book of Mormon writers claimed that *all* the prophets preached about this messiah.³⁷ Mormon commentators have insisted that "the spirit of prophecy is indeed the testimony of Christ, and every prophet down from Adam has made Christ's mission on earth the sum and substance to which all else points."³⁸

Another subject which Mormon sources address is the Law of Moses, meaning all of God's laws from Exodus to Deuteronomy. Because many Mormons think that the Mormon version of its origin is found in the Old Testament itself, let us contrast the accounts in the Old Testament and in the Inspired Version of the Bible: In the book of Exodus, Moses delivered at least a part of God's law to the Israelites. He went to the mountain to talk to God and returned to find his people had begun worshipping idols. In his anger, he shattered the tables on which the Law was written.

The Lord said unto Moses, Hew thee two tables of stone like unto the first: and I will write upon these tables the words that were in the first tables which thou brakest. And he wrote upon the tables the words of the covenant, the ten commandments. (Exodus 34.)

Compare this to the same passage in the Inspired Version:

And the Lord said unto Moses, Hew thee two other tables of stone like unto the first, and I will write upon them also, the words of the law, according as they were written at the first on the tables which thou brakest; but it shall not be according to the first, for I will take away the priesthood out of their midst; therefore my holy order, and the ordinances thereof, shall not go before them; for my presence shall not go up in their midst, lest I destroy them. (2) But I will give unto them the law as at the first, but it shall be after the law of a carnal commandment . . .

Doctrine and Covenants 84 buttresses this account. Moses tried to persuade his people to accept the Melchizedek Priesthood, which "administereth the gospel and holdeth the key of the mysteries of the kingdom, even the key of the knowledge of God." The people "hardeneth their hearts" and would not accept it, so the Lord in his wrath "took Moses out of their midst, and the Holy Priesthood also." So from Mormon scripture, and not from the Bible, comes the notion that the second law was terribly inferior to the first which contained the gospel and the priesthood. The Law of Moses was not given as a blessing or an aid in righteous living, but rather as a burden, an oppressive punishment imposed by an angry god because of their wickedness and weakness. It was a law of "performances and ordinances"³⁹ or "carnal commandments"⁴⁰ given because "they were a stiffnecked people, quick to do iniquity and slow to remember the Lord their God."⁴¹

Though the higher law was taken from the Israelites, some gospel teachings, baptism for the remission of sins, and the lesser or Aaronic Priesthood remained.⁴² Paul told the Galatians that the purpose of the Law of Moses for Jews of that time was to point them to Christ.⁴³ Mormonism asserts that this was the purpose of the Law for both the Israelites and the Nephites.⁴⁴ Not only were the sacrifices in the Law "types and similitudes" of the sacrifice of Christ for sin, but "all things which have been given of God from the beginning of the world unto man, are the typifying of him [Christ]."⁴⁵ The *Evening and Morning Star* commented that "whenever the Lord revealed himself to man in ancient days, and commanded them to offer sacrifice to him, that it was done that they might look forward in faith to the time of his coming and rely on the power of that atonement for a remission of their sins."⁴⁶ According to the Book of Mormon, the Israelites should have understood this.⁴⁷ They should also

have known that the Law by itself never had saving power; obedience to the Law had to be coupled with faith in Jesus Christ.⁴⁸

Another significant Mormon assertion is that Jesus Christ is Jehovah, God of the Old Testament. God, Elohim, created this universe through his son, Jehovah, who is also a god.⁴⁹ Jehovah came to earth as Jesus Christ, taking on a mortal body.⁵⁰ Jesus, appearing to the Nephites, said that he was the one who gave the Israelites their law and made the covenants with them.⁵¹ The Jews were condemned that in crucifying Jesus, they crucified their god.⁵² The Book of Mormon tells us that the Nephites as well as their Israelite ancestors knew that Jehovah was the Son of God. Mormon writers have assumed that the Israelites who wrote the Old Testament intended Jehovah to refer to one god and Elohim to another.⁵³

Why doesn't Mormon scripture and commentary match the contents of the Old Testament? Moses was told in the Pearl of Great Price that people would remove things from the scriptures he would write.⁵⁴ The Doctrine and Covenants explains that there are scriptural records that have been kept back because of the people's wickedness.⁵⁵ The "conspiracy theory" of 1 Nephi 13 tells us that designing and wicked people, in a very systematic way, removed parts of the scriptures which were "plain and most precious" and that originally these scriptures contained "the plainness of the gospel of the Lord." Jacob (4:14-15) adds that because the Jews preferred the esoteric to the plain, "God delivered to them many things which they cannot understand because they desired it." Thus, the apparent absence of Christ in the Old Testament is explained by deletions or obscuring.

But the differences between Old Testament thought and Mormon reinterpretations of it are too fundamental to be so simply explained away. Much of the core of Old Testament belief is destroyed when Mormon/Christian ideas are imposed upon it. (Admittedly, there are exceptions to this core of beliefs, for the Israelite religion was not static—it evolved.) The following normative and distinguishing features of Old Testament theology are irreconcilable with the Mormon commentary on the Old Testament.

Mormon scripture says that all of us are in a fallen state because of Adam's fall. But in the Old Testament the Fall is never referred to after its first telling.⁵⁶ Adam's fall is *not* an explanation for man's sinful state because Old Testament man is not inherently sinful. The Israelites were not aware that they had inherited an evil nature; in fact, the Old Testament assessment of man's basic nature tends to be positive. Furthermore, the Law provided those people with a way to make atonement for the sins they committed, for example, through sacrifices.⁵⁷ If they were obedient, they were in God's favor. What need

then, had this people, for an atoner to take away the effects of Adam's sin, or their own?

What sort of a messiah does the Old Testament say they should have expected? Old Testament messianic prophecies talk of a king born from David's lineage,⁵⁸ who would establish peace and prosperity like that enjoyed in David's United Monarchy. This king would rule wisely and justly.⁵⁹ There would be a return to the conditions of paradise, where plants produced abundantly without man's labor and neither men nor beasts did vio-

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lence to any creature. This ruler would liberate his people from political oppression and would establish an ideal, peaceful, morally governed kingdom.⁶⁰

This messiah was *never* described as the creator of the world. He was *not* the god to whom they prayed, nor the god who saved them at the Red Sea. He was a righteous mortal who was an instrument of God, not a deity at all.⁶¹ No Jew expected his messiah to atone for anyone's sins or to be crucified and resurrected. "A Messiah who suffers and dies as a substitute for all men in the New Testament was unknown in Judaism."⁶² The Israelites were told explicitly that human sacrifice was neither necessary nor acceptable to their god⁶³ and therefore a messiah who dies in this fashion was unthinkable.

The idea of a messiah was not very prominent in the Old Testament, appearing only in the later books. The prophecies about him are very vague, and had Haggai and Zechariah known, as Book of Mormon people did, that he was to come 600 years after 600 B.C., they would not have assigned the role of messiah prematurely to Zerubbabel and Joshua, both living before 500 B.C.⁶⁴

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Courtesy: God's Images

Even Jesus' apostles only gradually understood that He was the Messiah they had been expecting.⁶⁵

The Mormon view of the Law is also distinctly different from the Israelite view. The Law was not an inferior replacement for a gospel they were unworthy to live, a punishment for Israel's stubbornness, but was instead a feature of God's covenant with them. He offered them the exalted position as his special people if they would obey his law.⁶⁶ To the Israelites, the Law was not merely a set of rituals to be mechanically obeyed but also the ethical requirements which formed the moral basis of their society. The Law was a gift and a blessing. If obeyed, it would make them separate, distinct, and holier than any other people.⁶⁷ Obedience to the Law was the means by which the Israelites became acceptable to God and achieved a right relationship with him. There is no indication that any kind of baptism was ever a part of the Law or that its sacrifices prefigured Christ.

We run into another problem when we look at the Old Testament view of an afterlife. Christian salvation is chiefly something which applies in the post-mortal realm: a resurrection, a judgment, and the righteous dwelling eternally in a heavenly bliss with God and Christ. Christ's sacrifice made all this possible. This is the theology of the afterlife held by the Christian Israelites in the Book of Mormon, and Mormon scripture asserts that at least some Old Testament people also believed in this Christian heaven.

The theology presented in the Old Testament itself is very unlike this. (The handful of exceptions are all quite

late.)⁶⁸ The afterlife is not a state to be joyfully anticipated. All people experience the same sterile and monotonous existence there, sometimes described as a state of sleep:

"The sleep of death" (Ps. 13:3) is more than a phrase: it expresses exactly what most ancients regarded as the situation of the shades in Sheol, which is the land of silence (Ps. 94:17; 115:17), forgetfulness (88:12), darkness (Job 10:21-22) and destruction (26:6; Prov 15:11). The

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shades know nothing of what befalls their sons on earth (Job 14:21), and they can never come up to the land of the living (7:9): "Till the heavens be no more, they shall not awake, nor be raised out of their sleep" (14:12; cf. Jer 51:39, 57). The dead know nothing (Ecc. 9:5); "there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave..." (9:10).⁶⁹

The inhabitants of Sheol were thought to be outside the interest and care of the Lord.⁷⁰ Because the afterlife was a dismal half-existence, the Israelite expected to be rewarded for his righteousness or punished for his wickedness here and now. The idea of a redeemer who would facilitate salvation in the post-mortal realms is alien to this view.

Perhaps the view of the conception of God is the most



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significant difference between Old Testament thought and the Mormon reinterpretation of it. The Israelite deity was single, not multiple.⁷¹ The God of Israel demanded that the Israelites acknowledge no other god.⁷² Eventually their theology displayed complete monotheism.⁷³ How, then, could the righteous Israelite accept the creation account in the Book of Abraham, where "the gods" rather than "God" created their world?

The one God was responsible for everything, both good and evil. As Amos said, "Shall there be evil in a city and the Lord hath not done it?" (3:6; see also Job 2:10). There is no room here for the Christian view of Satan as the prince of this earth, the father of lies, the tempter and seducer of men—the being responsible for evil in the world.⁷⁴ Satan appears only four times in the Old Testament,⁷⁵ each time as one of God's servants whose function it is to question and test the genuineness of human virtue.⁷⁶ In no case is he the semi-deity of the New Testament who has a kingdom and great power which he exercises independently of God's wishes. He is not a rival deity who wants or gets worship from wicked mortals.⁷⁷

More important, the Israelite God could hardly have a son who exercised power along with him, who was co-creator and governor of the world. Israel's one God was called Elohim (or God), Yahweh (or the Lord), Yahweh Elohim (or the Lord God), or countless other descriptive and interchangeable titles. There is no support in the Old Testament for the idea that the titles referred to different beings. If their god were to come to earth as a mortal being,⁷⁸ he would not be in the heavens directing world affairs as well. The true god was beyond destruction or death, certainly not subject to an agonizing death on the cross.⁷⁹ Normative Old Testament theology simply does not allow multiple deities, neither a devil in charge of evil nor a son of God who is also a god. Yet Mormonism insists that all of these ideas were understood and taught

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by Old Testament people.

Typically Mormons reconcile these views by overlaying the commentary from Mormon scripture and General Authorities on the Old Testament. When the two are in conflict the deletion, conspiracy, or obscurity theory is invoked and the Old Testament is declared inadequate, inaccurate, or incomprehensible. In such contests the Old Testament will almost always be supplanted by the Mormon revision of it. In gospel study, this is understandable. But the place to explore the Mormon understanding of the Old Testament beliefs is in studying the Book of Mormon, the Book of Abraham, the Book of Moses, and the teachings of Latter-day prophets.

There is value in this approach but it is not Old Testament study. If we want to learn about the Old Testament, it should be allowed to stand by itself. Its unique message is lost when we read it for what it might have or should have said to be in accord with the gospel of Jesus Christ. We cannot learn from a people whom we disdain for being too weak to be the good Christians Mormon theol-

ogy says they should have been. Only if we grant that Old Testament people didn't act like Christians because they weren't Christians can we begin to understand the Old Testament's tremendous contribution to the shape of Western society.

NOTES

- John 5:39.
- John 8:56.
- Acts 3:20-24.
- Journal of Discourses* 16:263-64 (hereafter, *JD*).
- JD* 14:363-64.
- Messenger and Advocate* 1 (June 1835), p. 131.
- D&C 76:23-24; 93:8-10.
- Moses 1:32, 33; 2:1, 5, 26.
- Brigham Young in *JD* 1:51; Temple ceremony.
- 2 Nephi 2:22-25; Orson Pratt in *JD* 2:284-85; Temple ceremony.
- Mosiah 16:3-5; Alma 34:9; 42:10; Moses 6:49.
- Moses 5:5-8.
- Moses 6:52-53, 64-65.
- Moses 7:1.
- Moses 6:67; D&C 84:16.
- D&C 84:17-18; Moses 6:7; Abraham 1:3; Harold B. Lee, *Address to Seminary and Institute Faculty, "Priesthood,"* July 17, 1958, pp. 4-5.
- Genesis 5:24.
- Moses 6:54-62; 7:12.
- Moses 8:19; D&C 84:14-15.
- Moses 8:16-24.
- Abraham 1:2, 18; 2:10-11; D&C 84:14.
- Genesis 12:2-3; 17:2; 22:17-18.
- Abraham 2:10-11.
- John 8:56; Helaman 8:17-18.
- Abraham 3:18-23.
- Abraham 3:24-28.
- Abraham 4.
- Moses 1:8, 27-28, 35.
- Moses 4:1-4.
- Moses 4:5-6; 5:13, 28, 29, 38; 6:49.
- Mosiah 13:33; Moses 1:6, 6:52; 7:11.
- Helaman 8:13-15.
- Moses 1:39; 4:1; 6:52, 62; 7:62.
- 1 Nephi 19:10.
- 1 Nephi 10:5; 2 Nephi 25:28; 13:13.
- 2 Nephi 25:19.
- Mosiah 15:13; Jacob 7:11; Helaman 8:16.
- George Reynolds and Janne M. Sjodahl, *Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (SLC: Deseret Press, 1955), vol. 5, p. 267.
- Mosiah 13:30.
- D&C 84:27.
- Mosiah 13:29.
- D&C 84:26-27.
- Galatians 3:24.
- 2 Nephi 25:25; Jarom 11; Mosiah 16:14; Alma 34:13.
- Mosiah 3:15; 13:31; 16:14; Alma 25:15; Moses 5:7.
- Evening and Morning Star* (11 Mar. 1834), p. 143.
- Mosiah 13:30-32; Alma 33:19-20.
- 2 Nephi 2:5; Mosiah 3:15; 13:27-28; Alma 25:16.
- Moses 1:33; 2:1, 5, 26; Mosiah 3:18; 3 Nephi 9:15.
- 2 Nephi 9:19-22; Mosiah 13:34-35.
- 3 Nephi 15:4-9.
- 2 Nephi 10:3-5.
- George Reynolds, *Contributor* vol. 3, #1 (Oct. 1881), pp. 16-17.
- Moses 1:41.
- D&C 6:26.
- Possible exceptions are these allusions: Isaiah 43:27; Ezekiel 28:1-19; Job 31:33.
- Leviticus.
- Psalms 89:29; 132:11; Isaiah 11:1-10.
- Isaiah 9:6-7; Jeremiah 23:5-8; Ezekiel 37:24-28.
- Isaiah 11:1-10; Ezekiel 34:22-32; 37:24-28; Amos 9:11-15.
- E. Jenni "Messiah" in *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (N.Y.: Abingdon Press, 1962), vol. 3, p. 365.
- Ibid.*, p. 365.
- Leviticus 18:21; 20:2-5; Jeremiah 7:31; 23:25; Psalms 106:37-38.
- Haggai 2:21-23; Zechariah 6:12-15.
- Mark 8:27-33; 9:9, 31-32; Matthew 16:21-28.
- Exodus 19:5-8.
- Leviticus 19.
- Ezekiel 32:21-27 and Isaiah 14 speak of a separation of the righteous and the wicked in Sheol. Isaiah 26:19, Daniel 12:2, and Ezekiel 37 all speak of a resurrection from the dead. These are all exilic or later.
- Robert H. Pfeiffer, *Religion in the Old Testament*. ed. Charles Conrad Forman (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1961), p. 107.
- S. G. F. Brandon, *The Judgment of the Dead* (N.Y.: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1967), p. 58. See also Isaiah 38:18-19, Psalms 6:5, 30:9, and 88:4-5.
- Possible exceptions are found in Genesis 1:26; 11:7, and Deuteronomy 32:7-9.
- Exodus 20:1-6; Deuteronomy 5:6-10.
- Isaiah 40-55.
- John 12:31; 14:30; 8:44; Matthew 4:1; 1 Timothy 5:15.
- 1 Chronicles 21:1; Job 1-2; Psalms 109:6; Zechariah 3:1-2.
- John L. McKenzie, "Satan," *Dictionary of the Bible* (N.Y.: MacMillan Co., 1965), p. 774.
- Moses 1:12; 6:49.
- Moses 13:34.
- 2 Nephi 10:3.
- Moses 1-2; Abraham 4; Temple Ceremony; Joseph Smith in "King Follett Discourse," HC 6:308.

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