

The Mormon Christianizing of the Old Testament

A RESPONSE

Lowell L. Bennion

I think it's very natural that the early Christian religion would try to establish itself by "Christianizing" the Old Testament. After all Jesus, Paul, and Peter were talking to Jews, and they had to tie the new thing, the New Testament, in with the Old, with tradition. I think it's also very understandable that Latter-day Saints would want to Christianize the Old Testament. I think that Melodie has done a superb job of showing that we have tried to do that. And the early Christians did. I also agree with her statements to the effect that the basic Jewish concepts are quite foreign to the Gospel emphasis. Let me just remind you of a few of those very briefly.

Man is not sinful by nature.

Man could atone for his own sins by sacrifice or scapegoat. That was very clear.

The Christian concept of messiah doesn't fit the Jewish concept and that's one reason why Jews rejected him.

The reverence for the Law of Moses in the Old Testament and throughout Jewish history is very clear. I can't find any reference to Christian rituals like baptism any-

The Christian concept of messiah doesn't fit the Jewish concept and that's one reason why Jews rejected him.

where in the Old Testament. Some people seem to be able to do that.

I don't find immortality in the Old Testament except in the vague, sheol-fashion that was mentioned. For instance, in the Book of Job you'll find that oft-quoted passage, "In my flesh, I shall see God." Read the total book of Job. It's very clear that the author did not believe in any personal immortality of that nature. Scholars question the accuracy of that translation.

Monotheism is certainly the final outcome of the Old Testament. Now let me illustrate Mormon theology overlaid on the Old Testament. I heard a Latter-day Saint teacher say that eternal marriage was taught in the Old Testament. I haven't been able to find it in there but he said that God performed the marriage of Adam and Eve, so it must have been for eternity because God did it. Well, to me that's reading into it something that is not there. I don't mind something new in the latter dispensation, eternal marriage, temple work, and whatever else we have that is new and original.

Another thing that troubles me about Christianizing the Old Testament is the concept of deity that our author mentioned. Our people are taught that Christ is the God of the Old Testament. I don't think that that is an accurate statement. He is *a* god of the Old Testament from a Mormon perspective but why call him *the* God of the Old Testament? When Christ was on the earth he taught his disciples to worship the Father. It doesn't seem logical to me that Christ would ask in the Old Testament to be worshipped, and not have the Father worshipped as in other scriptures, in other dispensations. So I am personally inclined to believe that Jews and their Old Testament ancestors considered Elohim and Jehovah to be two names for God which both refer to a single deity in monotheism. Now I am not saying that Christ did not play a role in Old Testament times from a Mormon perspective. I think he was a revelator like he was in all other dispensations. He played a very important role. But to call him *the* God of the Old Testament is, I think, unfair to the Old Testament. I think that it's unfair to Mormon doctrine.

One other point. I think when we Christianize the Old Testament, we detract from the great and unique teachings of the book. It's kind of diversionary. Just to mention two or three of the great concepts of the Old Testament which we don't hear taught among the Latter-day Saints nearly enough. One is ethical monotheism or the great emphasis on the ethical character of God, and what he requires of us who would serve him in mercy.

Another great emphasis is social morality, on justice and mercy not in private life but in public life. In the marketplace, in the professions. In human relations generally. In society. In communities. To me that is one of the greatest teachings of the prophets of Israel. And our people are not very much aware of them.

I think we can learn much from the Psalms in terms of a worshipful, devotional attitude. This is terribly needed in our hurried, harried, secularized age. I go back and get a sense of worship from the Psalms.

I think another great theme has to do with suffering and the explanation of suffering. The book of Job, the 73rd Psalm, the realism that you find in Ecclesiastes. These are ideas and messages that were never taught to me in the context of the Christianized Old Testament interpretation.

LOWELL BENNION is former professor of Sociology at the University of Utah and former director of the University of Utah LDS Institute. He is currently Director of the Community Services Council and a bishop in Salt Lake City.