

### AGONY IN THE ECSTASY

The November-December 1983 issue of *SUNSTONE* contained two fine articles on the Atonement which in different ways focused on the agony Christ endured. Each asks penetrating questions, but I must suggest alternative answers.

Joyce M. Woodbury expresses concern that Mormon emphasis on the role of Gethsemane does injustice to the scriptural importance of the actual crucifixion. The price of sin was paid in the Garden and the wages of death were reconciled at Christ's death. Each act is an indispensable part of the passion, but the ultimate sacrifice of Christ's life is such a powerful human image that it symbolically encompasses both facets of the Atonement. It is therefore understandable for LDS authors to highlight the role of Gethsemane, which has been historically underemphasized.

While the scriptures clearly express the importance of the Crucifixion, we must not infer that the pain on the cross accomplished any part of the Atonement. While I can understand the suffering in Gethsemane as a result of the Atonement, I cannot imagine Christ under the Roman whip or nailed to the Roman cross as an integral part of the expiation. The Garden reconciled spiritual death; the cross merely supplied the means of Christ's death as a necessary prelude to the Resurrection. It was a cruel world which forced Christ to make his final sacrifice in so much pain.

Brother Batty is concerned with how a loving Father could allow the agony which was part of the Atonement. On this the scriptures are silent. I can offer only a personal observation. If the body enables in us capacities beyond those of the spirit (D&C 93:33-34), then the expiation most logically would have taken place in the flesh. In that state, while Christ's righteousness satisfied the law, his physical element acted together with his spirit (although only separably connected) in the same manner as the inseparably connected spirit and body of the Father. Only in that state could the Atonement be accomplished.

For Christ, his mortality and the Atonement are uniquely bound together. The celestial aspects of

the body enabled the atonement for sin, and the mortality of the body enabled the second stage of the Atonement which broke the bonds of death. However, the propitiation for sin so strained the limits of mortality that Christ sweat blood from every pore.

We must not assume that the requirements of the Atonement included intense physical pain. The agony endured was only a by-product of the ecstasy achieved.

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### ANESTHETIZED SACRIFICE

First of all, although I favor your desire to represent a broader spectrum of Mormon thought, the Hiltons' "Lihyanite" article (*SUNSTONE* 9:1) would have been more at home in the *Church News*. I certainly agree that it looks like "the Mormons made it up themselves."

Robert Bohn's article on tithable income raises, perhaps intentionally, far more questions than it resolves. A couple of comments:

Bohn suggests in his paragraph 7 that a family might be paying too much tithing if children pay tithing on money received from tithe-paying parents. He suggests as a remedy that the parents lower their own donation to compensate for the amount paid by their children. Apart from the questionable assumption that the "family" is the tithepayer, rather than the individual, this suggestion assumes that money once tithed is then somehow "clean," kosher, immune from further tithing. The theory that money, once tithed, can retain its tithed quality even after being transferred to another tithepayer, if taken to its logical extreme, would mean that an employee whose employer pays wages out of tithed funds would also be immune from tithing.

More alarming is Bohn's suggestion in the same section that children in low tax brackets might pay their tithing to their high-bracket parents, who would then forward the donation on to the bishop in their own name, thus enabling the parents to deduct the amount of their children's donation from their own taxable income. Aside from depriving the child of the formative experience of handing

his own donation envelope to the bishop, the proposal seems to constitute classical tax evasion, shifting a deduction from one person to another who doesn't himself qualify for it.

As to the progressive/regressive distinction of paragraph 15, Bohn's characterization of the universal ten percent tithe as "proportional" would be more correct were it not for the income tax deduction granted for charitable contributions. Quite apart from the marginal utility arguments Bohn acknowledges, the charitable deduction means that a person in a higher tax bracket actually pays a smaller effective percentage of his income as tithing than does his less affluent brother.

For example, a person with a taxable income of \$100,000 may pay \$10,000 in tithing, but at refund time he'll receive a check from the U.S. treasury returning roughly \$5,000 of his tithing to him. In effect, the government (i.e., other taxpayers) covers half his tithing liability—his actual tithing rate is only 5%. On the other hand, the worker with \$10,000 income who pays his \$1,000 share to the Church will receive none of it back. He pays a full, unrefunded 10%. That's regressive. In order to make the system proportional (not to mention progressive) those able to deduct any part of a charitable deduction for tithing would have to contribute their tax-saving attributable to their gift.

How to respond to that disparity and how to evaluate methods of manipulating tithing gifts to maximize tax benefits turns on what ultimately we consider the purpose of tithing. Is it merely an ecclesiastical tax assessed annually to enrich the Church coffers by a specified dollar amount? Or is it intended to make a meaningful sacrifice in favor of the Church? If it is the former, then it causes no alarm to have a portion of one's tithing paid by the government, or to manipulate family members' donations to maximize the charitable deduction, or to pay all one's tithing by donating appreciated property that actually represents a very small cash outlay. However, given the purported purpose of tithing as a temporary schoolmaster to help

the Saints overcome their greed and point them to the higher law of consecration, approaches and plans calculated to anesthetize the giver from the sacrifice seem inappropriately self-centered.

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### SEEK HISTORY, NOT HARMONY

The subject "Dating the Birth of Jesus Christ," as outlined by Joseph T. Hepworth (SUNSTONE 9:1), deserves another look. The tentative suggestion, "It is not for man to know the times or seasons" (Acts 1:7), is simply ill advised when applied to the area of historical investigation.

The basic problem with the biographical dates for the life of Jesus stems not so much from insufficient data as it does from the problematic attempt to reconcile contradictory pieces of information. The traditional Christmas nativity scene serves as an example. The placement of the three wise men side by side with the shepherds and the holy family is pure fantasy, but this same harmonizing effort is epidemic among most Christian historical commentators. Even though Mormons are aware of the serious shortcomings in the biblical text, there are many who follow this same harmonizing attempt without question.

The nativity, as reported by the record of Matthew, contradicts the same story as told by Luke. Matthew establishes a birthdate for Jesus shortly before the death of Herod the Great, who died in the early spring of 4 B.C., whereas Luke uses the background of the Roman census, which overlapped the years A.D. 6-7. One would like to discover a Roman census during the years of Herod the Great in a client state such as Palestine, but there is no evidence to support this possibility. There is an obvious disparity of nearly ten years between Matthew and Luke, which skips over the entire reign of Herod Archelaus (4 B.C. to A.D. 6). If we want to officially adopt the 1 B.C. birthdate, then we will either have to abandon the nativity stories told by both Luke and Matthew or establish an arbitrary set of historical guidelines.

The usual investigation into the biographical dates for the life of

Jesus rarely attempts to break new ground or place Jesus against his contemporary Jewish background. The very attempt to assign a specific date to the birth of Jesus according to our Julian/Gregorian solar calendar and western cultural outlook underscores the parochial methodology which is normally used to solve the problem. First, we must realize that a lunar calendar regulated Jewish daily life, and second, that recording individual birthdates was not a traditional Jewish custom when Jesus was born. Whenever an infant was born, he immediately became a "one year old," and then again when the first new moon of the religious new year (Nisan 1) arrived, the infant became a "two year old."

As strange as it may seem, an infant could be counted as a "two year old" even if he were less than two days old. This strange situation was true on any new year's day provided the infant was born on the day before. Thus, when we reference Luke 3:23, "And Jesus himself began to be about thirty years of age," we must realize that Jesus was still several years younger than we might otherwise expect. The only other age-related statement, John 8:57, "Thou art not yet fifty years old, and hast thou seen Abraham?" does not contradict the idea of a more youthful Jesus. This particular citation was a legalistic ploy which was used to disqualify anachronistic testimony in Jewish courts. In our modern idiom the statement might be translated as follows: "You have not yet passed a single half century (i.e., a jubilaic fiftieth year), how can you therefore testify as a firsthand witness concerning Abraham (who lived in a much earlier age)?"

By choosing to follow Luke's apparently more consistent chronology rather than the nativity found in Matthew, we can safely identify the first day on which Jesus advanced a year in age by referring to the volume, *New and Full Moons* (1973) as presented by Herman H. Goldstine. The proper entry shows a new moon on April sixth in the year concurrent with the Roman census, A.D. 7. This same train of thought would place

Jesus in his thirtieth year as he rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, 10 April A.D. 35, and would follow the pattern set by 2 Samuel 5:4: "David was thirty years old when he began to reign."

Although the above biographical sketch for the life of Jesus may be too brief to be accepted at face value, it can be further supported by identifying the sabbatical year as the "acceptable year of the Lord," and the Jubilaic Passover as cause for the customary prisoner "release." In addition, it is likely that 6 April was also the coincidental date for the ceremonial "blessing of the sun," which prompted Simeon in the proximity of the temple on Mount Zion to acknowledge Jesus as a "light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel." This same creation day anniversary was also observed again after a dominical cycle of twenty-eight years when Jesus and the heavenly forms of Elijah and Moses appeared on the Mount of Transfiguration. Jewish tradition honors this epochal "rebirth" of the sun as a special day of prayerful hope for messianic salvation. The Christian world, in contrast, chose the annual winter solstice Julian calendar date of 25 December, which occurred during the Saturnalian festival of *Misrule*, to commemorate the Savior's birth.

Many biblical commentators tend to surround the historical Jesus with a mystical shroud by wrapping the four Gospels within a cloud of canonical harmony. The Mormon viewpoint supports the more rigorous concept that all truth must exist in a state of universal harmony. We must therefore try to scrutinize the available material as thoroughly as possible. However, if we continue in a close-minded manner our efforts will certainly be futile. If, on the other hand, we have the courage to test our human reason by searching for the historical Jesus, we just might in the very process determine whether the heavens have been sealed shut on this subject.

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