



CORNUCOPIA

SUNSTONE invites short musings: chatty reports, cultural trend sightings, theological meditations. All lovely things of good report, please share them. Send to: <dan.wotherspoon@me.com>

Scripture notes

In this regular column, Michael Vinson, a master's graduate of the Divinity School of the University of Cambridge and a frequent devotional speaker at Sunstone symposiums, delves into personal and scholarly aspects of scripture.

JESUS AND MORMONS AND ZOMBIES

For ye are like unto whited sepulchers, which indeed appear beautiful outward but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness.

—MATTHEW 23:27

THIS YEAR THE CHURCH READING PLAN FOR Sunday School is the New Testament, but instead I have been wondering more about our current cultural zeitgeist that is fascinated with zombies, vampires, and the undead. This enthrallment is reflected in bestselling books such as *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, *Abraham Lincoln—Vampire Hunter*, the *Twilight* series, of course, and even a spoof of a children's reader, *Dick and Jane and Vampires*. “The new man is not a friend. Run, Dick! Run, Jane!”

Perhaps you have also wondered why, in the past few years, the popular media has been obsessed with zombies and the undead. Is it just a temporary fad, or does it reflect something deeper about our culture? If you think about it, the undead and zombies, are by definition, *consumers* of the living. They take your life, soul or blood, leaving you an empty shell.

Perhaps the reason we are obsessed with the eaters of the living is because so many of us are leading soulless lives. Perhaps something about having our life—our purpose—sucked from us resonates with us on a cultural level. So what does a soulless life look like?

I imagine that for each person, the soulless life would be somewhat different, but it

might have in common some of the following: a lack of purpose; an inability to self-direct our lives; a vague feeling of not being satisfied; and a feeling of incompleteness. There are probably many more I am not listing.

While popular media portrayals of the undead might be a current cultural reflection, the lack of soul in our lives—the emptiness that we feel—is actually something that some intellectual historians have written about. T.J. Jackson Lears, a professor at Rutgers, has written in his book, *No Place of Grace*, about the worries that beset turn-of-the-twentieth-century Americans: “Late Victorians felt hemmed in by busyness, clutter, propriety; they were beset by religious anxieties and by debilitating worries about financial security.” How familiar do these words seem to Mormons today? Part of Lears's thesis is that Americans turned to consumption—material consumerism—to try to satisfy an inner, spiritual hunger. It proved to be a vain effort—or given the current vampire vogue, should we say “vein” effort?

AT FIRST THERE doesn't seem to be much to relate *Zombies* to the New Testament, though perhaps there is a future bestseller lurking there—*Peter and Paul and the Undead*? But Jesus may have spoken more directly about zombies—the undead—than we realize.

Consider what Jesus might be referring to when he speaks about “whited sepulchers.” Some New Testament scholars think he is referring to the practice of erecting monuments over tombs—in effect, dressing the dead, for whom



no dress is now needed. Jesus' phrase might apply to the vanity with which we dress ourselves, diet ourselves, exercise ourselves, outfit ourselves with new cars and homes—all to appear beautiful to others, but all the while living empty—even dead—lives.

What does the “whited sepulchers” analogy mean for Mormons today? Could our inner spiritual life be empty, even though to outward appearances, our life appears complete?

Let me start by clarifying that by “spiritual,” I do not necessarily mean religious or Church practice, which is largely composed of activities easily seen by others. For example, we may have ward callings, attend church and the temple, do our home or visiting teaching and yet still might feel we have fairly empty spiritual lives. Can Church activities become just another form of “consumerism” that can be used to adorn and fill up (but not truly “fill”) our lives?

WHAT IS THE answer? Jesus does not list the solutions to the problems of soullessness in this verse in Matthew; he is identifying the problem so that his audience can completely understand. He is also giving them a bit of a double entendre in this analogy—not only are their spiritual lives as empty as tombs, but they are also as unclean as a tomb would be to a Jew (because of their beliefs about corpse impurity).

I wish I had an application or answer that you could plug into your life, but your solution will ultimately be unique to your circumstances and individual temperament. Yet what your unique answer to an empty life will have in common with others will be an inner feeling of completeness, of following your destiny, of directing your own life.

Instead of an answer, I have a question that might help motivate us all to find our inner life and meaning. Is Jesus suggesting in the analogy of the dead and impure tomb that an empty life is also a sinful one?

MICHAEL VINSON
Star Valley, Wyoming

Adventures of a Mormon bookseller

CRITICAL CONDITION

In this new *Cornucopia* column, Curt Bench, owner and operator of Benchmark Books (www.benchmarkbooks.com), a specialty bookstore in Salt Lake City that focuses primarily on used and rare Mormon books, will tell stories—both humorous and appalling—from his 35-plus years in the LDS book business.

IN THE USED AND RARE BOOK BUSINESS, WE SEE books in about every condition you can imagine, from looking like they've been used mainly as doorstops or coasters for coffee cups (and by “coffee,” we LDS booksellers assume Postum, of course!) to seeming as pristine as the day they were bound at the press. Some

books have obviously been read in the bathtub (a close friend of mine continues this barbaric habit despite my vehement protests) or at the kitchen table. Some book owners freely underline, highlight, and annotate their books while others would die before they'd put a mark in their precious possessions.



I thought I had just about seen it all until I bought an 1876 copy of the bound *Skandinaviens Stjerne* (Scandinavian Star), the official publication for the Scandinavian Mission in the nineteenth century. About a third of the way up from the bottom, dead center in the book's back strip, is a neat little hole—courtesy of a small-caliber bullet, which penetrated well into the book. Part of the fun of finding a book in this condition is speculating on how the bullet found its way into this bound mission newspaper—in the spine, no less. Was the shooter a disgruntled Oslo missionary who had had one too many doors slammed in his face? Was this volume the victim of random target-practicing at a dump? Or perhaps something more faith-promoting had happened: A missionary under attack by a violent, anti-Mormon mob clutches the book to his breast and bravely faces his armed assailants. An attacker fires, and the bullet enters the book, stopping just inches from the missionary's heart. The mob gasps in awe at the miracle and instantly converts.

Some years ago, we bought a used paperback copy of *The Measure of Our Hearts* by Marvin J. Ashton, priced it, and put it out for sale. The customer who bought it soon returned the book, saying that it wasn't the book he'd expected. Puzzled, we opened the cover and looked at the title page which read: *You Don't Have to be Gay: Hope and Freedom for Males Struggling with Homosexuality or for Those Who Know of Someone Who Is*. A previous owner had taken the book block of the Ashton title out of the cover and glued the block of this book in its place. I suspect that the previous owner perpetrated this radical re-binding so he could read about his same-sex attraction without anyone around him knowing about it. On two levels, this story confirms the wisdom never to judge a book by its cover!

All-seeing eye

THE FRUITS OF BOREDOM



“Let God and heaven be your GOOOAAAL!”

MATT PAGE IS NO SLACKER. HE’S MOTIVATED. Instead of being just a “Good Samaritan,” he is striving to become a “Great Samaritan.” Whereas “most people know all the words to a few select hymns, [he knows] the first line of many different hymns.” He confesses that he is “white but not delightful.” He will testify “The Church is true. But I’m still not going to stake conference.”

In August 2008, Page, a Utah-based graphic designer and illustrator, began *My Religious Blog*, subtitled “The Substandard Works of a Utah-Mormon” as an outlet for posting random thoughts and Mormon cultural musings that arise as his mind wanders occasionally (read that as “frequently”) during church meetings. The blog has been steadily gaining fans from all points on the Mormon spectrum. They groan at terrible puns—he’s thinking about “writing a movie about a werewolf who joins the Church after reading the Book of Mormon. It’s called *Lycan the Scriptures*. They consider his ideas—presented complete with sample images—for new video games. For example, his version of *PacMan* has the eponymous character following Joseph Smith’s instruction in D&C 129 to extend a hand toward the brightly colored ghosts he encounters in the maze in order to test what kind of spirit beings they are. They knowingly sigh at admissions such as: “I know we are not supposed to go against the teachings of the Church or voice our dissenting opinions, but I have a confession: I personally do not hope to endure all things,” and, “I guess I would have to say my favorite stage of the Pride Cycle is the stage where I am rich and prosperous.”

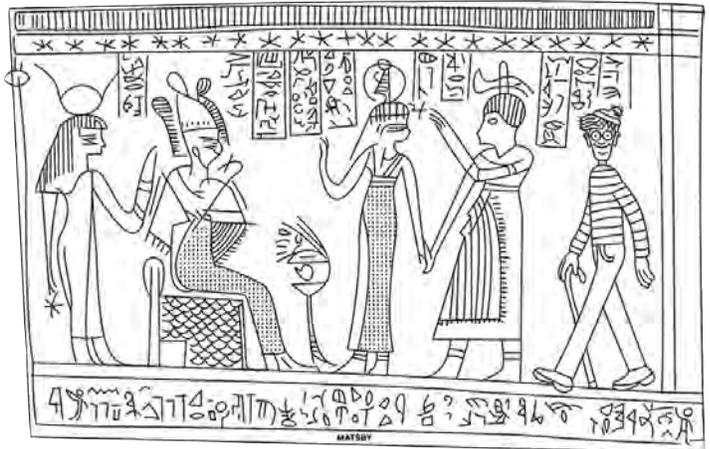
Putting his design skills to good use, Page often creates illustrations to enhance his observations. For instance, a recent spoof of the Church’s “I’m a Mormon” ad campaign features a man’s fist bearing brass knuckles that have “CTR” emblazoned over each hump. Its caption: “I’m a thug, a bully, a street fighter . . . and I’m a Mormon!” Another shows a “Facsimile from the Book of Waldo” with the lament that “Some things were a lot easier back then.”

My Religious Blog has recently spawned two spin-offs. Inspired by the wild success of *PostSecret*, Page has launched its natural successor for Mormons who have been conditioned to balk at any charge of “secrecy”: *PostSacred*. Begun in October 2010, this new site features postcard images containing such



confessions as “Sometimes I call the *Ensign* the ‘Nsun,’” or (written on top of a picture of Glenn Beck), “I Used to Get Excited when there were Mormons on TV. Now I want nothing more than for Mormons to never be on TV.” Page has also just added an online store, *E Pluribus Mormon*, where Latter-day Saints who share his sense of humor can order shirts and merchandise with images and slogans sprung from his creative (read that as: “wandering”) mind.

To find *My Religious Blog* and its spinoff sites, visit www.myregis.blog. (Yes, the website’s name has “regis” instead of “religious”—but that’s a story explained in the blog’s first post).



In the world

HAPPY BIRTHDAY, KJV

THIS YEAR, THE KING JAMES VERSION OF THE Holy Bible turns 400 years old. Reflecting on this quadricentennial reminds me of something literary critic Edmund Wilson once wrote:

Here it is, that old tongue, with its clang and its flavor, sometimes rank, sometimes sweet, sometimes bitter; here it is in its concise solid stamp. Other cultures have felt its impact, and none—in the West, at least—seems quite to accommodate to it. Yet we find we have been living with it all our lives. (From *A Piece of My Mind*, p. 88.)

If it is true that we in the West have been living all these years with the KJV; it is especially true of Latter-day Saints, where the “concise solid stamp” of the KJV is not only accommodated by mainstream Mormon life but so thoroughly integrated that we often speak in Elizabethan English with little thought of this linguistic inheritance. Even so, some among our ranks resist the KJV, looking upon it more like an archaic corpse from a less-enlightened dispensation. Despite the KJV’s being the official translation of the Church, many members point out its numerous errors, idiosyncrasies, and outdated vocabulary, hoping that one day the Church might replace it with a “more accurate” translation. Heck, even Joseph Smith mucked around with it. But this view often obscures the KJV’s deep influence in Western culture and particularly the English language, of which several recent books offer rich perspectives.

We probably *hear* the KJV more often than we actually read it. This is due to the tremendous influence certain idioms exert on our vernacular. “At their wits’ end,” “skin of my teeth,” “fought the good fight,” “how the mighty have fallen,” or “thorn in the flesh,” are among the hundreds of KJV phrases linguist David Crystal traces in *Begat: The King James Bible and the English Language*. He recounts how the language of the Bible has become a part of our common culture, from the sober and serious to the bizarre and humorous.

Crystal reports that his search through the KJV turned up some 257 idioms widely used today. Unexpectedly, he found that many of them had existed in previous English translations, such as the Tyndale, Geneva, and Bishop’s Bibles. This situation is not surprising, as one of His Royal

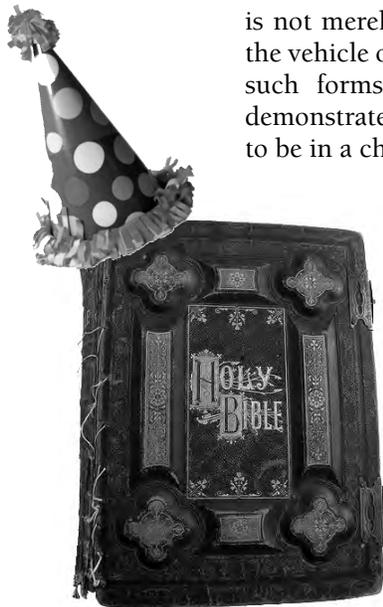
Majesty’s mandates to the KJV translators was to attempt a consensus among the various Bibles in use at the time, “with the former translations diligently compared and revised.” From there, Crystal follows how KJV phrases appear in many forms, such as in Lincoln’s presidential speeches and the episode of *The Brady Bunch* titled “My Brother’s Keeper.”

In his *Pen of Iron: American Prose and the King James Bible*, Berkeley Hebrew professor Robert Alter elaborates on the KJV’s aesthetic influence in fiction. Discussing works by Herman Melville, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Saul Bellow, Marilynne Robinson, and Cormac McCarthy, he writes that these authors “were often impelled to argue with the canonical text, or to tease out dissident views within the biblical corpus, or sometimes to reaffirm its conception of things, or to place biblical terms in new contexts that could be surprising or even unsettling.” Alter demonstrates how writers were informed by the KJV where “style is not merely a constellation of aesthetic properties but is the vehicle of a particular vision of reality,” implemented by such forms as parataxis and parallelism. Alter clearly demonstrates that American fiction has been and continues to be in a challenging dialogue with the KJV’s “vision of reality,” a dialogue that ultimately enriches the country’s storytelling impulse to create new worlds.

While Crystal and Alter have drawn the outlines of influence, Renaissance historian Gordon Campbell recounts the origins of the KJV in a lavishly illustrated history that sheds light on the people who are rarely remembered: the translators. *Bible: The Story of the King James Version, 1611–2011* reveals the complex history of how the translation was commissioned, who the translators were, and how it all came together in the end.

Of the translators, Gordon claims: “The learning embodied in the men . . . is daunting. It is sometimes assumed that people in the Twenty-first Century know more than the benighted people of the Seventeenth Century, but in many ways the opposite is true. The population from which scholars can now be drawn is much larger than that of the Seventeenth Century, but it would be difficult now to bring together a group of more than fifty scholars with the range of languages and knowledge of other disciplines that characterized the KJV translators.” Campbell’s admiration for the translators is evident, and he includes an appendix with a short biography of each.

Campbell also recounts the printing history of the KJV, providing plenty of amusing accidents. One infamous occasion is when a 1631 edition left out “not” from Exodus 20:14, thereby rendering God’s command to the children of Israel as “Thou shalt commit adultery.” The printer was fined. Even with the looming possibility of penalties,



printing errors continued to occur. Two of my favorites among Campbell's list are: "Know ye not that the unrighteous shall inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Corinthians 6:9, as printed in a 1653 edition) and "Let the children first be killed," (Mark 7:27, as it reads in a 1795 edition,). "Killed" should be "filled."

Despite the seemingly numerous translations available in our time; Gordon explains the KJV's lasting impact this way: "For secular readers, it is a repository of cultural values, a great work of literature, and a realization of the power and beauty of the English language. For believers, it is much more, because it renders into English content that is inspired" (275).

And even though some of us have gone on to search for this inspired content in other translations, I like what Campbell says about why the KJV keeps us coming back: "[It] is the fountainhead of Bible translation into English, and, although the finest modern translations are models of good scholarly practice, they are admired rather than loved. It is the King James Version that has been loved by generations of those who have listened to it or read it to themselves or others; other translations may engage the mind, but the King James Version is the Bible of the heart" (275).

As a literary masterpiece, a cultural landmark, and a theological chorus, Campbell's "Bible of the heart" reminds me (if I may plunder a verse) that the KJV is "written with a pen of iron, and with the point of a diamond; it is graven upon the table of their hearts" (Jeremiah 17:1). To which I add my hope that the King James Version will last another 400 years in our hearts.

DALLAS ROBBINS
Salt Lake City, Utah

A place for every truth

This regular Cornucopia column features incidents from and glimpses into the life and ministry of Elder James E. Talmage as compiled by James P. Harris, who is currently working on a full-length biography of this fascinating Mormon apostle. The column title is adopted from the statement inscribed on Elder Talmage's tombstone: "Within the Gospel of Jesus Christ there is room and place for every truth thus far learned by man or yet to be made known."

A PRE-WORLD WAR II PROPHECY

ELDER JAMES E. TALMAGE PASSED AWAY ON 27 July 1933. In addition to chronicling his thoughts and activities as a Mormon apostle, his journals describe important events of the day, such as the sinking of the *Titanic* and almost daily reports concerning the unfolding events of World War I. Because he passed away before the full onset of World War II, his journals have only a few brief

entries related to it, though he did seem to take notice of some events that would eventually prove to be important precursors to that war. One of the most prescient entries of this sort is what he wrote on Wednesday, 10 May 1933, about trends he was noticing in Germany.

Conditions in Germany are greatly disturbed and widely disturbing. Under the dictatorship of Adolph Hitler an edict of repression directed against the Jews appears to have been ruthlessly carried into effect. Anti-Semitic activities have been characteristic of the Hitler regime, and many eminent Jews have been ousted from positions of honor and trust, and their places in the learned professions made almost if not entirely unbearable. Jewish judges and barristers have been excluded from court practice and Jewish professors and instructors have been removed from the faculties of universities. Einstein, the world-famed physicist and mathematician, whose latest visit to the United States dates but a few months back, has taken up his residence in Holland, being virtually barred from his native country, Germany. Now comes word that night before last great bonfires were made of books by Jewish writers and many other volumes by foreigners. Unlike the destruction of the great Alexandrian library and that of Mayan literature by fanatical Spanish priests, this wanton and barbarous burning of books in Germany cannot destroy these records of knowledge, as, thanks to the printing press, copies of all the important works are to be found in other countries. If the regrettable act is expressive of the German mind and spirit—which is to be greatly doubted—it is an evidence of decline suggestive of an impending fall of the German nation.

Talmage passed away before he could see the true excesses of the Third Reich—the War itself, concentration camps, and the horrific and inhuman crimes we now refer to as the Holocaust. Given his careful watch of the world stage, the question can rightfully be asked: If Talmage had lived longer, would this apostle and keen observer of his times have used his various platforms within Mormonism to raise awareness of Nazi atrocities, possibly influencing Latter-day Saints to take a more pro-active stance against such evils? We will never know.

We do know, however, that if we are to answer the Savior's call for us to be peacemakers, we as Latter-day Saint leaders and individual members must follow Elder Talmage's example and pay close attention, as D&C 88—the section Joseph Smith called "The Olive Leaf"—says, to "things which are at home, things which are abroad; the wars and the perplexities of the nations, and the judgments which are on the land; and a knowledge also of countries and of kingdoms" (v. 79).